3 1761 07837509 4

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Toronto

http://www.archive.org/details/greifenstein03craw

GREIFENSTEIN

GREIFENSTEIN

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

AUTHOR OF 'MR. ISAACS,' 'DR. CLAUDIUS,' 'A ROMAN SINGER,' 'ZOROASTER,' 'A TALE OF A LONELY PARISH,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III

London

MACMILLAN AND CO.

AND NEW YORK

1889

All rights reserved

COPYRIGHT
1889
BY
F. MARION CRAWFORD

PS
1455
G7
1889
v.3

1101163

CHAPTER XXI

Greif recovered quickly. In due time the celebrated physician departed in great peace, hoping that chance might soon send such another case into his way. Greif and Rex lived together in Greifenstein, and Hilda and her mother were at Sigmundskron. But the distance between the two places had grown very short of late, and scarcely a day passed on which Hilda and Greif did not meet.

He was not quite as strong yet as he had been before his illness, but the time was not far distant when he would be able again to get into the saddle and make short work of the twenty miles that separated him from Hilda. There had never been so many horses in the Greifenstein stables as now,

for the work was hard and continuous and the roads bad. To make matters easier, Greif had sent a strong pair to Sigmundskron, so that the two ladies might drive over whenever they were inclined to do so.

On a sunny day in April the two men were walking together in the garden, backwards and forwards from the parapet that followed the edge of the precipice to the porch of the house. Greif rested his hand on Rex's arm, more out of habit now than because he needed support, and as they paced the smooth path the two talked in a desultory way upon whatever was uppermost in their thoughts.

'It seems as though my illness had lasted a year,' Greif said. 'I have even got so far that I do not care to leave this place, after all.'

'Why should you?' Rex asked.

'It would be natural,' answered Greif rather gravely. 'I should have expected to prefer any spot of the world to this.'

'Man is the world, and all that therein is, and the earth he stands on, is no more

to him than the clothes he wears. If a thought is in your heart, can you get rid of it by changing your coat? And besides, in the long run a man prefers his own coat and his own patch of earth—both are sure to fit him better than those of other people.'

'I think you are right. Rex, did I act like a madman before I was taken ill?' He asked the question rather suddenly. Hitherto Rex had avoided mentioning what was past as well as he could.

'Yes—you were quite mad,' he answered. 'You fought windmills. That is always a bad sign.'

'It is fortunate that I broke down just then. Suppose that I had held out long enough to go away and that I had fallen ill in some distant place, and that Hilda had not come—I should not have had much chance.'

'No. I was very jealous of her, I remember.'

'Why?'

'Because she saved you, and I could not,'

answered Rex. 'Because it is disagreeable for a selfish man to feel that a woman's eyes are better than his skill or strength.'

Greif looked at his companion as though he did not quite understand, but the smile upon the latter's face made matters somewhat clearer. He would not have liked to think that Rex was quite in earnest.

'But for you,' he answered, 'I should have died long before Hilda came.'

'Not at all. If you had shown signs of giving up the ghost earlier, I would have sent sooner. But it was a narrow escape. Another minute would have done it, as I have often told you.'

'Do you know that I have not yet spoken to them about the marriage?'

'Then there is no need of saying anything. They understand as well as you. You need only fix the wedding-day.'

'Not yet,' answered Greif. 'It is too soon.'

'Is it ever too soon to be happy?'

'Sometimes—but I will go to Sigmundskron to-morrow and talk about it.'

'In that case you will be married in three months,' observed Rex with a laugh.

'Not so soon—we must let the year pass first. It would not be decent.'

'Decency is that mode of demeanour in ourselves which satisfies the traditional likes or dislikes of others. There is nothing else in it.'

'If you are going to begin a discussion about comparative right, I will say nothing more. I have lost my taste for argument, and I never had much skill in it.'

'We will not discuss the matter,' replied Rex. 'You will be married in August.'

'I think not.'

'We shall see.'

'Will you go with me to-morrow?' asked Greif, relinquishing the contest.

'You had better go alone, and I shall be best here, with my books. You will not need me to help you to settle matters.'

'Why do you so rarely go with me?'

'Why should I?'

'To keep me company. It is a long drive.'

'The entertainment, so far as I am concerned, is not of a wildly exciting character, when you are talking to Fräulein von Sigmundskron, and her mother is doing needlework, and I am thrown upon my own resources. Whereas if I stay at home and read, I have the pleasure of hearing your very good description of all that I should have been entitled to see and hear had I been present myself. The description occupies five minutes; the expedition takes a whole day. I will stay at home, thank you.'

'But it gives them pleasure to see you,' objected Greif.

'Does your cousin regret my absence from the sitting-room when she is walking with you upon the sunny side of the ramparts?'

'How did you know that we walked there?' asked Greif with a laugh.

'On the same principle which teaches me that a dog will walk on the sunny side of the street—because you would not be likely to walk in the shade at this time of year.

Did you say that Fräulein von Sigmundskron regretted my absence on such occasions?'

'She always asks after you when you do not come. Why do you call her by such long names? "Cousin Hilda" is quite enough.'

'It is not a cousinship she could be very proud of. I prefer not to force it upon her. She could not call me "Cousin Horst."'

'She will have as much cause to be proud of your cousinship as of having me for a husband,' said Greif, stopping in his walk and looking at Rex. 'Whatever you say of yourself applies equally well to me in this matter.'

Rex said nothing, but he thought of all the truth there was in the words which Greif did not know, and never must know. He had not told all his reasons for not going to Sigmundskron, either, and if he had told them, they might not have been altogether pleasing to Greif. He was ashamed of them, even before himself, and thought of them as little as possible.

Hilda's presence affected him unpleasantly.

What he felt, when he was with her, strongly resembled an unconquerable dislike, which was at the same time wholly inexplicable to himself. He could appreciate her beauty only when he was at a distance from her, and then the memory of it attracted rather than repelled him. When she spoke, he had an instinctive longing to give her a sharp answer, which was smothered in a phrase of meaningless politeness; but he afterwards took delight in fancying what her expression would have been if he had really said what had suggested itself to him. He could not explain the intense antagonism he sometimes felt against her, by any theory or experience of psychology with which he was acquainted. Her look annoyed him, her slightest gesture irritated him, the sound of her voice distressed his ear. Even her grace of motion jarred upon him, and he wished she could be clumsy and slow instead of swift and sure. He had disliked women before, but never in the peculiar way he disliked Hilda. Everything she did looked wrong, though he knew it was right; every

word she uttered sounded false to him, though he was well aware that she was one of the most truthful and true-hearted persons he had ever known.

He supposed that what he felt had taken its origin in a ridiculous jealousy, on that day when her appearance had revived Greif at the last moment, and he recurred to the scene constantly and tried to magnify his first impression in order to make his present state of mind seem a little more reasonable. He only half succeeded, however, though he kept what he thought to be his own folly clearly before him at their next meeting and forced his manner and his voice to obey his common sense.

The result of all this was that Rex was once more growing dissatisfied with his life. Had he felt sure of Greif's future he would have gone away and would not have returned until a long lapse of time, and a constant change of scene, had obliterated what was so disagreeable to himself. His prudence warned him, however, that he should stay until all was settled, and Greif

was married to Hilda. After that, it mattered little what became of him. He reflected with satisfaction that he was over forty years of age, and that, even if he chose to live out his life, he was not likely to survive his brother. Whether he should not one day find himself so weary of it all as to anticipate his end by a score of years, was a point about which he thought much. Such tragedies as had darkened Greifenstein rarely take place where there is not a fatal tendency to suicide in the blood. Death had never seemed horrible to Rex in any shape; on the contrary, he took pleasure in speculating upon its possibilities and in dreaming of the sensations which the supreme moment would evoke. To a mind altogether destitute of any transcendental belief whatsoever, death appears to be merely the end of life, to be made as little disagreeable as possible and encountered with such equanimity as a philosopher can command. To such men as Rex, the idea that there is any obligation to live if one prefers to die, does not present itself, and when they

inherit from their fathers an indifference to life, the danger that they may part with it too readily is seldom far distant. The thought of Greif had prevented Rex from stepping over the limit, and his affection for him would probably have kept off such gloomy thoughts altogether for a long time, if Greif had depended upon his companionship. But as Greif recovered and this dependence grew less and less a matter of necessity Rex grew weary again. If he had not felt as he did in regard to Hilda, the two would have been more together than they actually were, and Greif would not so often have driven twice in a day alone over the twenty miles that separated his house from Sigmundskron. Rex saw this, and saw that Hilda was taking his place, and he became disgusted with himself and the existence he was leading. Nevertheless, his naturally firm character made his outward demeanour even and unchangeable. He was determined that if he must be ridiculous in his own eyes, he would not appear to be so in the eyes of others. For

the present he could not leave Greifenstein, for he could be of use to Greif, who would sooner or later be obliged to put his affairs in order, and examine the papers left by his father. Rex feared indeed, lest among these should be discovered some letter from the dead man, explaining to his son what had been so clearly told to Rex himself. A superficial search had discovered nothing, but he reflected that at such a moment a man might well put what he had written in a place where he was in the habit of concealing precious documents, instead of laying it upon the table. Rex was determined to have the chief hand in the examination of what was found, and to abstract and destroy unopened anything which looked like a letter to Greif. He cared little for any justification in pursuing such a course; from what he had learned of old Greifenstein he believed that he would have been capable of telling the plain truth to his son and of enjoining upon him to give up his name, and to hand over his whole fortune to the Sigmundskrons. He had been a stern man

with fearfully rigid traditions of honour, incapable, Rex thought, of allowing Greif to practise an unconscious deception, willing that he should come to a miserable end rather than seem, even for a moment, to be what he was not. It was almost inconceivable to Rex that he should have died without writing a few words to his son, and if he had done so, Rex had little doubt as to what the letter would contain. Should it be found, he intended to do his utmost to destroy it, unknown to Greif, and in the meanwhile, he did all in his power to hasten the marriage and to put off the evil day when the papers must be examined.

The lives of the two were made somewhat irregular by Greif's constant visits to Sigmundskron, and occasionally by the coming of the baroness and Hilda. The good lady thought that there was little dignity in bringing her daughter to Greifenstein, but she was quite unable to oppose Hilda's determination. So long as Greif had been only in the convalescent stage it had seemed

proper enough that the baroness should occasionally come in person to make inquiries, the more so as Greif had placed a pair of horses at her disposal for this very purpose as soon as he could give an order of any sort. Now that he was perfectly well, however, she felt that in spite of the relationship it was strangely contrary to custom for two ladies to visit a young man who lived alone. She would not have been a German of her class if she had not felt this, but she would not have been herself if she had allowed a scruple of etiquette to stand in the way of Hilda's happiness.

There was still an element of uncertainty in the situation which caused her some anxious moments. Since his recovery Greif had never approached the question of marriage. It was indeed early yet, but the opportunities had already been numerous, and he had not taken advantage of any. The only point which favoured the impression that he had changed his mind, was his frank and easy manner together with his evident desire to see as much of Hilda as

possible. But he had not spoken. The baroness was keen enough to fancy that he was prevented from referring to the subject by the painful reminiscence of his last interview at Sigmundskron, and by a natural feeling of shame at the thought of retracting what he had once taken such infinite pains to say. She was determined that the matter should be put upon a sound basis as soon as possible, and she promised herself to lead the conversation to the marriage whenever she had a chance.

Unfortunately for her intentions the chance did not present itself, for Greif spent the time of his visits with Hilda, and talked as little as possible to her mother. The latter could almost have found courage to come alone to Greifenstein, but Hilda would not have allowed her to do so, for she would not have been willing to miss an opportunity of a meeting. In this way matters had continued for some time after Greif had been well enough to decide finally upon his own future as well as upon Hilda's, until he himself felt that he must soon speak

his mind, or be very much ashamed of himself for his hesitation.

Of all concerned, Hilda was the one whose character had changed the most since the events of the winter. It seemed as though she had never before realised what she was, nor what she was able to accomplish in the world. From the day of Greif's refusal to marry her at Sigmundskron she had developed suddenly, from a simple girl into a strong and dominant woman. After Greif had left her on that day she had still felt as certain of marrying him as though they were already going to the altar. When she had known that he was really ill she had felt an inward conviction that he would recover quickly. When she had found him dying she had known that she could save his life. She had acquired a sense of certainty which nothing could disturb, and which had developed simultaneously with a moral energy no one had before suspected that she possessed. If there had ever been any resistance on either side the baroness would not have felt as though her daughter

had suddenly taken the mastery over her, but there had been none. Never, in their peaceful lives, had they experienced opposite desires or incompatible impulses. It had never seemed as though Hilda were submitting to her mother, even when she was a child, because their wishes appeared to be always exactly the same, so that Hilda would have done of her own free will, and if left to herself, precisely what her mother desired her to do. The consequence was that since Hilda had found that she had a will of her own, she had imposed it upon her mother with the greatest ease; for the latter was so much taken by surprise at Hilda's initiative, as to take refuge in believing that the girl must really want what she herself wanted, and that it was only the appearance which made the result look different. It was only a half belief, after all, for she could not help seeing that circumstances had singularly developed the girl's character, and that they had been of a nature to do so, exceptional, startling and trying in every way. Frau von Sigmunds-

kron liked to fancy that she could still control every impulse Hilda showed, as well as formerly, but she could not help being proud of her daughter's strength, for Hilda was like her father, a man who, with the sweetest temper imaginable, had dared anything that a man may dare.

Greif carried out his intention of going to Sigmundskron on the day after his conversation with Rex. During the drive he thought of what was before him, as he had thought three months earlier, when the prospect had been very different.

At present he felt that it would be impossible to delay his retractation any longer. So far as his happiness was concerned, the situation might last until the eve of the wedding-day, but there were other considerations to be thought of, which he could not disregard. Hilda and he understood each other without words, but Hilda's mother could not be expected to understand without a formal explanation. She had a right to it. Greif's last act before his illness had been to refuse the marriage;

the baroness was entitled not only to know from his own lips that he had changed his mind, but also to be consulted in the matter, as a question of courtesy. Greif did not know exactly how to manage it. To his mind there would be something inexpressibly ridiculous in asking an interview with Frau von Sigmundskron, for the purpose of formally requesting, a second time, the honour of her daughter's hand. And yet he assuredly could not go to her and say bluntly that he had changed his mind and intended to take Hilda after all. Anything between the two must necessarily take the shape of an apology of some sort and of a retractation, though Greif felt that he had done nothing needing an apology. He could not ask the baroness's forgiveness for having been stubbornly determined to sacrifice his whole life rather than injure her daughter by giving her his name. It was true that he now saw the matter differently, perceiving that he had done all that a man of the most quixotic chivalry could do to prove the case against himself, and that his

judges refused wholly to be convinced. He did not regret what he had done, though he was willing to believe that he had gone too far in the right direction. He had offended no one, for his whole conduct had been guided by the consideration of others. He had therefore nothing to be forgiven him, and no shadow of a reason for putting himself in the position of a penitent. To say that he had been mistaken, and to try and shift the responsibility of his action upon his illness, was not to his taste either. He had not refused to marry Hilda because he had been ill at the time, but because he had been convinced that he ought to do so. At present he was grateful both to her and to her mother for their readiness to oppose his self-sacrifice. That at least he could say; but after that it would be necessary in common courtesy to put to the baroness the question old Greifenstein had asked long ago, in other words, to renew the formal proposition of marriage. As a man of honour it was indispensable that he should clearly define his position without

further delay, and he could see no other way of defining it, satisfactory to himself and to the exigencies of his courteous rule of life.

There was still another matter to be decided, and which did not tend to make the coming interview seem easier. The origin of the whole difficulty had not been removed, and although Greif had made up his mind to submit to the happiness which was thrust upon him, he still felt that to marry Hilda under his own name would be out of the question. He was even more sure of this than before, for he had learned during his convalescence that the tragedy of Greifenstein had been described in every paper of the empire, and he knew that it must be the common topic of conversation. His old comrades at Schwarzburg had read the story and had written, some offering condolences, some refusing to believe the tale at all. The professors of the University whose lectures Greif had chiefly attended, had written in various manners, and the Magnificus himself had deigned to offer his

sympathy in a singularly human manner. Most of these communications had been answered by Rex, who explained that Greif had been seriously ill, and Greif himself replied to the more important ones. The horror of the story was known through the length and breadth of the land, and wherever Greif might go for years to come, his name would instantly recall the terrible details of the triple crime. All the arguments Greif had formerly used with so much force remained unshaken, and he felt that there could be but one way of placing himself and Hilda beyond their reach. Had Hilda never existed, he would have determined to live in retirement, and to allow his race to be extinguished in his own person, rather than perpetuate the memory of such deeds. As it was, he had given up the thought, for the love of her, and he knew that there was happiness in store for him. In order to accept it, however, he must be no longer Greifenstein.

It was strange that each of the three in turn, Rex, the baroness, and lastly, Hilda

herself, should have suggested the advisability of his taking the name of Sigmundskron in place of his own. Clearly, it was the only course open to him, but it was a curious coincidence that they should all have had the same thought. On the whole he was ready to follow their advice, but as he drew near to his destination he realised that it must be the first point settled. He did not exactly know how to formulate his request, for he had never known anybody who had asked another for his name. He almost wished that Hilda could manage it for him, which was a proof that he had not yet altogether recovered his strength.

He was glad that Rex had not come, after all. It was one of those errands which he preferred to accomplish alone. Moreover, for some reason which he could not guess, Rex seemed to avoid the Sigmundskrons as much as he could. That he should never remain long in conversation with Hilda, Greif thought natural; his cousin's action might proceed from delicacy, of a curiously

unusual kind, or it might be the result of Rex's constant wish to leave the two together as much as possible. In either case it was not altogether surprising. But Greif often wished that Rex would take the trouble to talk to the baroness, so that she might not be left so much alone. It would have completed the party and made every one feel more easy; after all, Rex was a man forty years of age, and might reasonably be expected to devote his attention with a good grace to a lady who was not much older than himself, though her white hair contrasted oddly with his uncommonly youthful appearance. But Rex hardly ever failed to find some excuse for staying at home when Greif went to Sigmundskron, and when the ladies came to Greifenstein he generally made his appearance as late as possible. Nevertheless Greif believed that his cousin did not dislike the Sigmundskrons, and it was certain that both mother and daughter thought extremely well of him. Greif could not explain Rex's coldness, and was obliged to ascribe it to some uncommon

bias of a remarkable character which he had never wholly understood.

Being full of such thoughts, the time that had elapsed, between the present day and the memorable visit three months earlier, seemed to Greif to have dropped away with all it had contained. He felt as though he had refused the marriage but yesterday and were going to take back his refusal to-day. Only the weather had changed between then and now. On that morning the ground had been covered with snow, and a bitter wind that cut like a knife had been blowing across the road. It was even yet not spring, but the snow was all gone, and the frost was thawing out of the ground under the warm sun. In a few days the white thorn would begin to bud, and fresh green violet leaves would come out along the borders of the woods. A few birds were already circling in the air above the fir-tops as though expecting to find the flies there already. The warmth and the moisture of everything brought out the sweet smell of the forest and blew

it into Greif's face at every turn of the drive.

For the twentieth time since he had been well enough to go out, he watched the sturdy horses' backs as they drew the light carriage up the last steep ascent. For the twentieth time he looked up as he reached the point whence the lower battlements of the half-ruined castle were visible. As often happened, he descried Hilda's tall figure against the sky, and then immediately the gleam of something white, waved high to welcome him. He wondered how she always knew when he was coming. But Hilda had found that when he came he naturally started always at the same hour, so that every morning she went up, and stood on the rampart for twenty minutes, scanning every bit of the winding road that was in sight. At the end of that time, if she had not seen the carriage, she knew that he was not coming, and descended again into the interior, her face less bright and her eyes less glad than when she had gone up the steps.

There she was to-day, in her accustomed place, and a moment later the sun caught the white handkerchief she waved. As he flourished his in return, Greif wondered how he could ever have come over that same road with the fixed purpose of bidding farewell for ever to her who awaited him, and he was amazed at his own courage in having executed his intention, for he felt that he could not do as much now. But there was little time left him for reflexion. Five minutes later the carriage rattled through the gate into the wide paved court, swung round upon its wheels and stopped before the hall door. Out of the dim shadow Hilda came quickly forward and took his hands, and they were together once more, as they had been so often during the last month and a half.

'I have not come to see you,' said Greif, with a laugh that only half concealed his embarrassment. 'I have to request the honour of an interview with your mother to-day.'

Hilda looked at him a moment and then laughed too.

'Has it come to this, Greif!' she exclaimed.

'It has come to this,' he answered, his mirth subsiding at the prospect of what was before him.

'And what are you going to say?' she asked. 'That you have changed your mind? That you yield to pressure? That you are the lawful prey of one Hilda von Sigmundskron and cannot escape your fate? Or that you were very ill and never meant it, and are very sorry, and will never do so again? Why did you not bring Rex to talk to me while you are explaining everything to my mother?'

'Rex would not come to-day. He sends his homage——'

'He always does—I believe you invent it—the message I mean. Rex hates me, Greif. Do you know why? Because he is jealous. He thinks you do not care for his society any longer——'

'That is absurd—you must not say such foolish things!'

They reached the door of the sitting-room as he spoke. Greif entered and found himself with the baroness. Hilda closed the door when he had gone in and went away, leaving the two together.

CHAPTER XXII

Frau von Sigmundskron was somewhat surprised when she saw Greif enter the room without Hilda. Greif went up to her with the determination of a man who means to lose no time in getting through an unpleasant business.

'Aunt Therese,' he said—he called his father's cousin 'aunt,' after the German manner—'I told Hilda that I wanted to speak with you alone—do you mind?'

'On the contrary,' answered the baroness. 'Sit down. I will work while you talk. It will help me to understand you.'

'The matter is very simple,' said Greif, seating himself. 'I want to ask whether you are still of the same opinion in regard

to my marriage with Hilda, as before I was taken ill.'

'Of course I am——' She looked up, in some surprise.

'Because I am not,' said Greif, delighted with himself at having found a way to make his aunt state her case first.

'Not of my opinion, or not of your own former opinion?' she inquired, rather puzzled.

'I mean to say that I now once more ask for Hilda's hand——'

Frau von Sigmundskron laughed, and laid down her work, to look at his face. She had not expected that he would express himself in such a way. Then all at once she saw that he had meant to act in the most loyal manner possible, and she grew grave, being pleased with him as she almost always was.

'Do you think you need my consent again, Greif? You have it, with all my heart. You need hardly have asked it, for you knew the answer too well.'

'It is this,' said Greif, coming to the

point. 'In the first place, I knew very well what you would say, though I thank you all the same; but it was necessary to come to a clear understanding, because there is another point to be settled upon which much must depend. What I said three months ago holds good to-day. As Greifenstein I cannot marry Hilda. As Greif, I cannot any longer forego the happiness you and she have pressed upon me. But I must have another name——'

'Is it really necessary?' asked the baroness gravely.

'It seems so to me. The papers have been full of our story, and I have received many letters of condolence, and some full of curiosity. It is a tale which no one will forget for many years. Few people could help associating disgrace with so much crime. I wish to marry Hilda under a name by which we may become known if we choose to go into the world hereafter, and which may be free from all disagreeable associations. You yourself suggested that I should take yours, she has suggested

it and so has Rex. If you consent, it seems best that it should be so.'

'Sigmundskron ——' She pronounced the syllables slowly, almost lovingly, and her eyes were fixed on Greif with a look he did not understand.

He could not know all that the name meant to her. She had married the last man who had borne it by his own right, the gallant young soldier, who was to restore the fallen fortunes of his race, in the only way in which they had ever been restored before, by the faithful service of his country. She remembered how firmly she had believed that he was to be great and famous, how confidently she had hoped to bear him strong, bright-eyed sons worthy of him and like him, who should in their turn do great deeds, of which he should live to be proud. The dream had vanished. Brave Sigmundskron had been shot down like many another, a mere lieutenant, with all his hopes and grand visions of the future, and his wife had been left alone with a widow's pension and her little child. A

girl, too—it had seemed as though nothing were to be spared her. If she had had a boy to bring up, another Sigmundskron to grow to better fortunes than his father, and perhaps to realise all his father had dreamed of for himself, it would have been easier then—but a girl! The name was ended, never to be spoken again, as it had been so many times, in the roll-calls of honour. She had brought him home and laid him beside his fathers, and she herself had broken the shield upon his tomb with her own hands, for he was the last of his race. In him ended the line of ancient Sigmund, as it had begun, in the strife and fury of battle. It had been a glorious line, take it all in all; though its last warrior had been but a poor lieutenant, he had been worthy of his fathers and had died the worthy death. If only Hilda could have been a man!

And now, after so many years, one stood before her, who craved the right to bear that spotless name, though he had not one drop of old Sigmund's blood in his veins.

She had even offered it to him herself—she wondered how she could have had the courage. What sort of a man was this, who would call himself Sigmundskron, like her dead soldier, and be Sigmundskron in all men's eyes, and marry Hilda and be the father of many Sigmundskrons to come? She looked at Greif long and wondered what he would turn out to be.

That he was honourable and true hearted, she knew; that he was brave she had reason to believe; that he loved her daughter well, she knew also. But it was hard. Why did he want the name of her beloved dead? Because his own was stained—not by his fault—but it was darkened and made a reproach. Ay, it is easy for a man with a bad name to desire a good one; it is natural; if he be innocent, it is very pardonable. Greif had a right to ask for it, but would she give it? Would she suffer that which had been so long glorious in itself, that which was made sacred by the shedding of good blood in good cause, that which recalled all she had once worshipped—

would she suffer that to be made a mere cloak for the evil deeds of Rieseneck and Greifenstein, murderers and suicides? It was hard to do it.

And yet she was willing, nay, even glad, that this man should marry her only child, the only daughter of her husband. She loved him in a way, for he was to be her son, the only son she could ever have. Ah, that was it. Greif was to be her son. She gazed into his face and wondered whether, if she had searched the world, she could have found one goodlier and stronger and truer to be a match for her own child, whether if she ever dreamed of what might have been, she saw in her fancy a son more worthy than this. And, after all, he did not ask the boon for his own advantage. He had bravely struggled to give up Hilda rather than let her risk the smallest worldly disadvantage or reproach through him. He asked for this for Hilda's sake, not for his own, and would it not be a thousand times better that Hilda, and Hilda's children, should still be Sigmundskron than wear a

name black with ill-shed blood? Since she was to have a son given her would she not rather have him Sigmundskron than Greifenstein? Could he ever be a true son to her so long as he was called after those who had treated herself coldly and heartlessly during so many years, and who themselves had come to such an evil end?

She looked at him once more. Then she put out her hands and took his and drew him close to her so that she could see into his eyes. When she saw what was in them she was glad.

'Will you be a son to me, Greif von Greifenstein?' she asked solemnly.

'I will indeed, so help me God, and you shall be my mother,' he answered.

'Then you shall be Sigmundskron,' she said. 'You are brave—be as brave as old Sigmund. You are true—be as true as he. You are faithful—be faithful to death, as he was, who was the last of Sigmund's sons.'

The white-haired lady rose as she spoke, and drawing him still nearer to her, kissed his smooth young forehead, with the pale

lips that had touched no man's face since her dead husband had gone from her to his death.

'Go and tell Hilda that you will be Sigmundskron to her in deed, and in heart, as well as in name,' she said.

As she left the room, erect and with firm step, he saw the bright tears burst from her eyes, and roll down her pallid cheeks, though she would not bend her head nor heed them.

For many minutes he stood where she had left him, his hand resting upon the edge of the table, his look fixed upon the door, absently and seeing nothing.

'That is what it is to have a spotless name,' he said, almost aloud.

He went out softly as though from a hallowed place, and closed the door noiselessly behind him. His small anticipations of what that scene would be like, full of many words and attempts at tactful speech, seemed infinitely pitiful and contemptible now, beside the dignity, the kindness, the noble pride and the grand simplicity of the

woman who had given him her name. He walked slowly, and his head was bent in thought as he threaded the well-known passages and stairways to the old rampart where he knew that Hilda was waiting for him.

She was sitting upon one of the stone projections, hatless in the April sun, her beautiful figure thrown into bold lines and curves as she looked down upon the road, sitting, but half turned upon her seat. She heard the crazy door of the turret creak and rattle, and she moved so that she could see Greif.

'It has not lasted long,' she said, with a smile. 'Why do you look so grave?' she asked quickly as she noticed his face. 'Has anything happened?'

He sat down beside her and took her hand.

'Do you know what your mother told me to say to you?' he asked.

She shook her head expectantly, and her expression grew bright again.

'She told me to tell you that I would be

Sigmundskron to you in deed, and in heart, as well as in name—can I say more?'

'But one thing more,' she answered, as her arms went round him. 'But one thing more—that you will be Greif, my Greif, the Greif I love, always and always, whether in my name or yours, until the end!'

As his own thoughts had dwindled before Frau von Sigmundskron's earnest dignity, so that in turn grew dim and far away in the presence of Hilda's love. All had been right in their own way, but Hilda's speech was the best, and there was the most humanity in it, after all.

A long time they sat side by side in the sunlight, talking of each other and of themselves as lovers will, and must, if they would talk at all. As they were about to go down, Hilda stopped, just at the entrance of the turret, and swung the broken door gently on its creaking hinges.

'You must not let your cousin hate me, Greif,' she said, as though the thought troubled the cloudless joy of the future. 'It would not be right. We must all be

one, now and when we two are married. He saved your life by his care—why should he dislike me?'

'He does not, dearest—you are mistaken,' protested Greif, who was much embarrassed by the question. Hilda faced him at once, laying her hand upon his arm.

'He does, and you must see it. Why does he never come here? Why is he so cold when we go to Greifenstein? I do not care a straw for his like or dislike, except because he is your cousin, and because I think we should all live harmoniously together. The strange thing is that he would give his life for you, and I am sure he is honest, though I cannot see into his eyes as I can into yours. What is the reason? You must know.'

'I do not. I can see that he is very reserved with you and does not like to come here. I asked him only yesterday why he always stayed behind.'

'And what did he say?' asked Hilda eagerly.

'Nothing to the point. He said he could

not be of any use if he did come—which, after all, is absolutely true.'

'You must find out. He dislikes me now, when we are married it will be worse, a year hence he will detest me altogether and tell you so, perhaps.'

'Do you think he would tell me?' asked Greif with a quiet smile, that did not agree with the sudden glittering of his eyes.

'No,' laughed Hilda. 'That is an exaggeration. But he will make us both feel it.'

'In that case we will not ask him to stay with us,' answered Greif, half carelessly, half in anger at Rex's imaginary future rudeness.

He saw that Hilda was annoyed by his cousin's conduct, for it was the second time she had spoken of it during the visit, and he determined that he would put the matter very plainly to Rex as soon as he reached Greifenstein, the more so as he himself had noticed it and had already asked Rex for an explanation.

Hilda's face grew grave. She knew how

devoted Rex was to Greif, and she felt as though her future husband were to lose his best friend for a meaningless whim of the latter in which she was involved against her will.

'That must never be,' she answered. 'Next to me, no one loves you as Rex does. I would not have you quarrel for all the world — and it is mere jealousy, Greif, I know——'

'Then he must be a very contemptible character,' said Greif indignantly.

'Because he is so much attached to you that it pains him to see his place taken by another, even by a woman? No, sweetheart. That is not contemptible. But you must change it. Tell him to be reasonable——'

'Could I say that you are offended with him?' asked Greif. 'Can I go to Rex and tell him that he must not only be civil but must be a friend to you?'

'You are jesting,' she answered. 'But it is just what I would do in earnest—what I will do, if you will let me. He would

understand that. I would say to him, Herr Rex, you are Greif's only relation besides ourselves. It is absolutely necessary for his happiness that we should be on good terms, you and I. Is it my fault? He would answer that it was not, for he is honest. Then it is yours, I would say, and the sooner you turn yourself into a friend of mine, the better it will be for Greif, who is the only person you care for in the world. Is not that common sense?'

'Do you mean to say that?' asked Greif rather anxiously.

'If you will let me, I will,' answered Hilda, returning to her occupation and swinging the old door slowly between her two hands.

'If I will let you!' repeated Greif. 'Do you think I would try to prevent you from saying what you please, darling——'

'You ought to, if you think it would be a mistake—at least, after we are married.'

'I am not sure that I could,' he answered with a laugh.

'No one else could,' said Hilda, looking

up at him with flashing eyes. 'If I meant to do a thing, I would do it, of course. Did I not say that I would not let you go?'

'Indeed you did. And you kept your word.'

'And I love you—you know it?'

'It is all I know, or care to know.'

'Well, I will tell you something more. Because I love you, I want to do what you like, and not what I like, and I always will, so long as you love me.'

Greif drew her to him and held her close, and whispered a tender word into her ear.

'But you must understand,' she said. 'It is not because you are to be my husband, that I mean to submit to you. I do not submit at all, and never shall. I am just as strong as you are, and you could not make me yield a hair's-breadth. But I will always do everything you wish me to do, because I love you, and because you love me, not for any other reason. Do you understand?'

'I would not have it otherwise, my darling—and I will do the same——'

'You cannot quite—you cannot feel as I do, Greif. Perhaps, some day—when you and I are old, Greif—then you will love me as I love you now, but then, you see, I shall have learnt how to love you more, and you will still be hindmost in love's race—for women are made to love and men to fight, in this world, and though I could fight not badly, if need were, for you, yet I know better how to do the sweeter thing, than you can ever know. Do you not believe me?'

'Since you would have me——'

'You do not—but you will, some day,' she answered, shaking her beautiful head a little, and tapping the door with her fingers. 'And now, dear,' she added, laying her hand in his and beginning to walk up and down the old battlement, 'and now, shall I tell Rex, or will you?'

'I will tell him,' said Greif firmly.

'Then promise me not to be angry, Greif. I could do it so well—but it is better so. Promise me that you will say it in such a way as shall make you feel afterwards that

you have done the best—even long afterwards; in such a way as to show him how you value his friendship. He saved your life, by his care——'

'And you called me back from death with your eyes——'

'Do not think of my eyes, when you are talking to him,' interrupted Hilda gravely. 'Think of all he has done for you, and of what such a noble friendship deserves in return. Think that he is a lonely man, and not so young as you, and that he needs a little affection very much. Think that all I want is that we may be able to live happily together, you and I, and he, when he cares to be with us. But do not think of me—or if you do, think that if you and Rex were parted I should not forgive myself. Do I not owe him your life, as you do? If you had died, because he was not there to tend you—— I cannot speak of it—but you owe him much, for it is your life, and I more, for I owe him our two lives together. Will you tell him that?'

'I will try—he will not understand it all.'

'Then, if he has not understood, if you cannot make him see it, then it will be my turn. But you can, Greif dear, I know you can. And it is not a small matter either, though it may seem so now. It is not a small matter to part with such a man as that, nor is it an insignificant evil, that I should have his dislike at the very beginning, before we are married. You must do your best, you must do all you can, and you will succeed—and by and by we will work together. Greif——' she stopped suddenly and looked at him.

'What is it, dear?' he asked.

'Greif, do you think I have any other reason for wanting Rex to like me? Do you think I am a vain woman?'

Greif stared at her a moment, and then laughed aloud.

'Why do you laugh?' she asked, quietly. 'Perhaps I am right. I have read of girls who were so vain that they wanted every man they saw to like them—and I have never seen any man—young, I mean, but

you, until I saw Rex—and so I thought —perhaps——'

She did not finish the sentence, but stood looking at him with an expression of serious doubt upon her lovely face that made Greif laugh again.

'Because if that were it,' she said gravely, 'Rex might go, and I should be glad of it——'

'Hilda! How can you have such ideas!' cried Greif at last. Her innocence was so astounding that he could not find words to answer her at once.

'There might be just a possibility——'

'That you, in your heart of hearts, are not satisfied with me alone, but want to make a conquest of Rex besides! Poor Rex! How he would laugh at the idea—Hilda, you must not think such things!'

'Is it wrong?' she asked, turning her clear eyes upon him.

'Wrong? No. It is not wrong to any one but yourself, and it is really very wrong to believe that you could be capable of a contemptible, silly vanity like that.'

'You do not think I should be—what do they call it—a coquette—if you took me into the world?'

'You? Never!' And Greif laughed again, as he well might.

In a woman differently brought up it would have been impossible not to suppose that such words were spoken out of sheer affectation, but Greif knew too well how Hilda had lived, to suspect such a thing. Her innocence was such that she did not understand the commonest feelings of women in the world, not even the most harmless.

'I hope not,' she said. 'I do not mean to be bad, though I believe it is very easy, and one does not always know it, when one is.'

'I should think one would know it oneself sooner than any one else,' answered Greif. 'But if I find out that you are bad, Hilda, I promise to tell you so.'

'Seriously?'

'I do not run any risk. What children we are, Hilda! And how pleasant it

is to be children together, on a day like this, in a year like this, with such a creature as you, sweetheart!'

'We cannot always be children,' she answered. 'Will it be very different then, I wonder? Will there be any change, except the good change of loving more than now?'

'I do not see why there should be. Even if that never came, would it not be enough, as it is?'

'Love must grow, Greif. I feel that. A love that does not grow is already beginning to die.'

'Who told you so many things of love, Hilda?'

'Who told me?' she repeated, as the quick fire flashed in her eyes. 'Do I need to be told, to know? Ah, Greif, if you felt what I feel—here—' she pressed her hand to her side, 'you would understand that I need no telling, nor ever shall. You are there, dear, there in the midst of my heart, more really even than you are before my eyes.'

'You are more eloquent than I, sweet-

heart,' said Greif. 'You leave me nothing to say, except always to repeat what you have said.'

'If I said little——' She stopped and laughed.

'It is not words only, nor the tones of them that make things true. If I had the skill I could say better what would please you to hear, but having none, I make your speeches my own, to be enough for both of us.'

'Do you never feel as though you must speak, or your heart would burst?'

'No—I wish I could, for then the words would come. I think that the more I feel the less I am able to say.'

'You talked very badly when you were trying to persuade me that we ought not to marry,' said Hilda, with a side glance at his happy face.

'And you talked well—too well——'

'Which of us two felt the more, I wonder?'

'What I felt was almost too much. I came near never speaking again. I do not know how I got home that day.'

'And I—do you know? When you were gone, I did not shed a tear, I did not try to run after you, though I thought of it. I went quietly into the house and sat down and told my mother what I had said. Was it heartless, do you think? Was it because I felt nothing? It is true, I did not believe you were really ill, since you had the strength to go away on foot.'

'What was it then?' Greif look wonderingly into her face.

'It was victory, and I knew it. For one moment I was frightened, and then I saw it all. I saw you come back, as you have come to-day, to say what you have said. I felt as though my hand were still on your shoulder, as though you could not escape me, do what you might. I never doubted, until that dreadful day when Wastei came over and told my mother that you were very ill. He did not say you were dying, but he told us that your carriage was on the way to fetch us, and that they were sending relays of horses along the road so that we should lose no time—and she would

have left me behind. But I knew the truth. I knew that if I could see you, you were saved; and then, when I pushed my mother aside and went in, it seemed too late. If I could die at all, being so strong, I should have died in that moment, when your head fell back upon my arm and your eyes closed —and then, a minute later, they told me you were saved, for when I knew you were still alive I knew you would be well again —and then—and then—oh, Greif!'

The tears that pain or sorrow could not have wrung from her, broke forth abundantly in the memory of that overwhelming joy. If Hilda had not been Hilda, the only woman of her kind, Greif would have kissed the tears away as they started from her eyes. But being Hilda, he could not. It was over in a minute, but he had become a little pale and his arm trembled under the light pressure of hers. She brushed the drops away, and saw his altered face.

'What is the matter, dear?' she asked. 'It is only happiness — they do not hurt.'

'Sometimes you are so beautiful that I do not dare to touch you,' he said softly.

She turned her golden head quickly with a bright smile, and a crystal drop that lingered on her lashes fell upon her soft cheek. It was as though his words had been the breath of the south wind gently shaking the last drop of a summer shower from the petals of a perfect rose.

'How shall I not be vain, if you say such things!' she exclaimed.

'How can I see you so, and not say them?' he asked.

'It is time to go down,' she said. 'We meant to go, when I began to speak of Rex, ever so long ago.'

'I had forgotten Rex.'

'Do not forget him. He is a good friend.'

So at last they descended the broken stair and disappeared into the house. When Greif was ready to go, and the carriage was before the door, Frau von Sigmundskron led him away from Hilda.

'Let it be done soon,' she said, earnestly.

'The marriage?' asked Greif in surprise.

'No—the name. Let it be changed as soon as the lawyers can do it.'

'I will see to it at once,' he answered, wondering at her haste.

She saw the look of inquiry in his eyes and paused a moment, holding his hand in hers.

'I have lived long without a son—give me one—and Sigmundskron has had no lord these eighteen years.'

'I will not lose a day,' he said. 'And once more—I thank you with all my heart.'

He kissed her thin hand, and turned away to bid farewell to Hilda. A moment later the light carriage was whirling out through the castle gate. The two ladies watched until it was out of sight.

'God bless you,' said the mother solemnly, as though she were speaking to Greif. 'God bless you and bring you back to be a son to me—no more Greifenstein, but Sigmundskron, you, and yours for ever, and ever! God bless you!'

Hilda looked at her mother intently.

She did not know all that the words meant to the quiet, white-haired woman beside her. She could not know how often in those long years Therese von Sigmundskron had wished that, instead of a daughter, a son had been given to her, to bear the name and wear the sword of her dead husband; she could not know of all the tears her mother had shed in bitter self-reproach at her own ingratitude in thinking such a thought.

'You do not understand, child,' she said, taking her daughter by the hand. 'Come with me.'

She led her to her own room. Upon a piece of black stuff on the wall, were hung two swords, one a sabre, and one a rapier in a three-cornered case, and above them a leathern helmet with a gilded spike. Beneath these weapons was a heavy old carved chest. With Hilda's help she lifted the lid. Within were uniforms and military trappings of all sorts, and in one corner, folded together, a roll of faded bunting. This she took out and unwrapped, and spread it wide upon the floor.

It was torn and patched and faded, for it was the old flag that used to wave upon the dilapidated keep of the castle. On an azure field three golden crowns were set corner wise, two above and one below. Hilda looked at the banner curiously, and then at her mother.

'We must make a new one, Hilda,' she said. 'And Wastei must pick out a tall, straight sapling from the forest—for Sigmundskron has a lord again, and the old flag must float on the wind when he comes to his home.'

CHAPTER XXIII

Rex had not been wrong when he predicted that Hilda and Greif would be married in the summer. It had certainly been the intention of the latter to allow the whole year to pass after the winter's tragedy, before tasting the happiness that was before him, but even if his own courage had been equal to the trial of waiting, other circumstances would have determined him to hasten the day. Perhaps the most impatient of all was Frau von Sigmundskron herself, and indeed the oldest are often those most anxious to precipitate events, as though they feared lest death should overtake them before everything is accomplished. The good baroness was by no means old, but she was in haste to see the fulfilment of her hopes.

Hilda, who was already supremely happy, would have waited, if Greif had desired it, and she at first approved of his intention to let the proper time of mourning elapse. But Greif yielded without much opposition to the wishes of Frau von Sigmundskron, who, strange to say, was seconded by Rex.

'It seems very wrong to do it,' said Greif to the latter, as they sat one evening together in the arbour of the garden, listening with pleasure to the sound of the cool torrent tumbling along far below. It was late in July.

'There is nothing wrong in that which makes all happy,' answered Rex, taking his cigar from his mouth.

'But there is a decency which is apart from right and wrong,' objected Greif, for the hundredth time.

'Then keep it apart. Besides, decency can be divided under two kinds. The one does not concern us, for it is purely esthetic. As for the other sort, it means that tactful respect for tolerably sensible traditions, by which society expresses its wish to continue

to exist in social bonds. It is founded on the necessity which exists, where many live together, of not hurting the feelings of our neighbours. If you can show me that you are offending any one's sensibilities by getting married now instead of five or six months hence, I will give up the contest and go to bed, for it is late. If you cannot, and if you persist, I am ready to argue with you all night.'

And so Greif suffered himself to be persuaded, and the wedding-day was fixed in the end of August, and everything was got ready.

Long before this, Rex and Greif had done all that there was to be done in regard to the succession, and had sorted and arranged such papers as had to be examined. But though Greif had willingly left the bulk of the work to his cousin, and though the latter had searched everything far more thoroughly than Greif guessed, not a scrap of writing had been discovered which could be taken for a message from the dead man to his son. Rex wondered what had be-

come of the letter, until at last he began to suspect that it had never been written. At first this appeared to be a wild and inexplicable supposition, but the more he thought of it, the more certain it grew, in his opinion, that Greifenstein had died without leaving a word of farewell to Greif. The letter Rex himself had received afforded a key to the situation. Old Greifenstein's character had been stern, resolute, moral, unbending. Rex felt certain that if he had written to Greif at all, the letter would have contained a solemn injunction, commanding him to take the consequences of his mother's crimes, to give over the whole fortune and estate to the Sigmundskrons, as lawful heirs thereto, and, after confessing frankly that he was nameless and penniless, to bear his poverty and shame like a brave man, because they were inevitable in the course of divine justice. He would probably have recommended him to enlist as a private soldier, and trust to his education and to his own strength of determination for advancement.

The stiff-necked old gentleman would in

all human probability have expressed himself in this manner, and Rex knew Greif well enough to know the son would have fulfilled the father's injunctions and carried out his orders to the letter, no matter at what cost.

On the other hand, it was possible that the grim nobleman might have relented at the last minute. He might even have torn up the letter after writing it, and burned the shreds in the library fire. If he did not write at all, it was clear that matters were likely to remain in their existing condition so far as Greif was concerned. He could not foresee that the circumstances of his death would make Greif go to such lengths as to break off the marriage. He would have guessed with a show of probability that Frau von Sigmundskron would not refuse Greif and his fortune for her daughter, on account of the evil associations created in the name of Greifenstein by the triple tragedy. He would have said to himself that he was not obliged to speak, since the money, the only thing which could be con-

tested, would, after all, go to the Sigmundskrons; and in that case he would have considered it justifiable to take his secret with him to the grave.

There was only one objection to this attractive theory, and that lay in the letter Rex himself had received. If Greifenstein had determined that his own son was never to have any key to the mystery, he would never have allowed his brother to write down the details for Rex, even with an injunction to secrecy. And he had been a man capable, especially at such a time, of enforcing his will upon Rieseneck. Unfortunately it was impossible to know which of the two men had died first, and here a third possibility presented itself which Rex could not afford to ignore, though it contained a considerable element of improbability. It was conceivable that Greifenstein should have been the first to die. In that case Rieseneck, who must have felt that he had ruined Greif by his revelations, might have burned his brother's letter, before pulling the trigger. It would have seemed

more natural in that case that he should have also destroyed his own, but it might be that he had warned Rex for a good reason. Without such a warning, and if he had been a less devoted friend of Greif's, Rex might perhaps have instituted inquiries into his father's death which would have caused trouble, and which might even, by some wholly unforeseen accident, have revealed the whole truth to Greif himself. No one could tell what witnesses were still alive to swear to the identity of her who had been the wife of both. There must necessarily have been foul play in procuring the false papers upon which she had contracted her second marriage, and she assuredly could not have forged them alone. It was highly probable that some former associate of hers in the revolutionary times had remained unnoticed in a government office after the troubles were over, and had helped her to free herself from Rieseneck, who had been the instrument of the revolutionary powers, by procuring for her a set of false papers accurate enough to defy

detection. Such things might well have happened at such an unquiet season. It would have sufficed that such a person should communicate what he knew, cleverly shielding himself at the same time, in order to reveal the whole story; and if no one had been warned of the danger, while Rex himself was using all the power of the law to account for his father's death, the result might have been fatal to Greif.

Nevertheless, Rex clung to the theory that Greifenstein had never written at all, and he met such difficulties as the theory presented, by supposing that he had not been aware that Rieseneck was writing to Rex. In any case, nothing had been found after the most exhaustive search, and Rex was beginning to believe, willingly enough, that nothing would ever be discovered. To avoid all risks, however, he did his utmost to hasten the marriage, feeling that after that event there would be less to fear from a disclosure of the truth.

Meanwhile Greif had obeyed the wishes of Frau von Sigmundskron and had taken

immediate steps to change his name. In Germany the matter is an easy one, as it is managed chiefly through the Heralds' Office. Nothing is required beyond the formal and legal consent of all persons bearing the name which the petitioner desires to assume. When this is given, the necessary formalities are easily fulfilled, and a patent is placed in the hands of the person who has applied. After that, it is no longer in the power of the family who have given their consent to withdraw the name, under any circumstances whatsoever. In Greif's case, everything was done very easily. The Heralds' Office was well aware that the male line of the Sigmundskrons was extinct, and that the family was only represented by Hilda and her mother, the necessary documents were forwarded, signed and attested by the two ladies in the presence of the proper persons, and returned. A month later Greif received his patent, sealed and signed by the sovereign, setting forth that he, Greif von Greifenstein, only son of Hugo, deceased, was authorised and entitled

to be called henceforth Greif von Greifenstein and Sigmundskron, that he was at liberty to use either or both names and to bear arms, three crowns proper, or, in field azure, either quartered with those of Greifenstein or separately, as good should seem in his own eyes.

And at mid-day on a certain day in June, the wood-cutters in the forest had looked towards the towers of Sigmundskron as they sat in the shade to eat their noon-tide meal, and they had seen a great standard rising slowly to the peak of a lofty staff, and catching the breeze and floating out bravely, displaying three golden crowns upon its azure breadth.

'What is it?' asked one, a young fellow of twenty years.

'It is the flag of the Sigmundskrons,' answered a grey-haired, beetle-browed man, pausing with a mouthful of cheese stuck on the end of his murderous knife. 'I have not seen that these twenty years, since the poor baron was killed in the war. There must be a new lord in Sigmundskron. We will ask to-night in the village.'

And as they talked, the banner, hoisted by Wastei's wiry arms, reached the very top of the staff, and remained there, waving majestically, where many a one like it had waved during eight hundred years and more. At that moment Greif, in his carriage, was coming up the last ascent. He saw the lordly standard, changed colour a little and then rose in the light vehicle and uncovered his head. He felt as though all the dead Sigmundskrons who lay side by side in the castle chapel had risen from their tombs to greet the new possessor of their name. He could not do less than rise himself, and salute their flag, though it was now to be his own. His young heart, full of knightly traditions and aspirations, felt something which a man of a younger race could not feel. It represented much to him, which is lost in the glare of modern life. It was easy for him to fancy the old Sigmundskrons in their gleaming mail, high on their armoured horses, riding out in a close squadron from their castle gate with their standard in their midst, some to die in de-

fending it, and some of them to bear home its tattered glories in victory. It was an easy matter for him to identify himself with them and to feel that henceforth he also had a part in their history. And there was more, too, in the sight of the gleaming colours and dancing waves of the tall banner. It was to him the signal of a new life's starting-point, the emblem of a new name. Yesterday he had been burdened with the remembrance of blood shed in evil wise, to-day he began his existence with a fair scroll before him on which no shameful thing was written. As he stood bareheaded in his carriage, he was as it were saluting this new life before him, as well as doing homage to the memory of the dead Sigmundskrons.

So Greif was no longer Greifenstein now, and he informed the few persons whom he wished should know the fact. And the time passed quickly on to the wedding-day. In the meanwhile, between April and August, Rex and Hilda met more often than before, and to all appearances they met on

the best of terms, to the no small satisfaction of Greif himself.

'Rex,' he said one day, 'Hilda is to be my wife, and it is necessary that you should like her. You cannot have any good reason to the contrary, and yet you act as though she were positively repulsive to you.'

Thereupon Rex's stony eyes had expressed something as nearly like astonishment as they were capable of showing, for he was surprised at being found out, almost for the first time in his life, and he perceived that Greif had not found him out alone.

'I am sorry that she should think me capable of disliking her,' Rex answered. 'My position, indeed, is so different from what you both suppose it to be, that I would make any sacrifice rather than see this marriage broken off.'

Greif looked at him a moment, not quite understanding, for it was impossible that he should appreciate all that Rex meant by the words. He was pleased, nevertheless.

'I wish you would go and tell that to Hilda,' he said in answer.

'I will,' said Rex, and he did so on the first occasion that offered.

He and Greif went over to Sigmundskron together. Indeed, Rex went for the express purpose of making his speech to Hilda, and Greif occupied the attention of the baroness for a while in order that the two might talk undisturbed.

'So you have come at last,' said Hilda. 'It is long since we have seen you.'

'Yes, and I have come for an especial purpose,' answered Rex. 'It appears that, in the inscrutable ways of fate, I have passed for an ill-mannered barbarian in your eyes, and so I have come to show myself and to tell you what I think on certain points.'

'You talk very mysteriously,' said Hilda.

'The prologue of a tale should always be mysterious. It is only the epilogue that must needs be clear. The story may be between the two. The matter of all three is very simple, because it concerns you and me. To be plain, Fräulein, I have come to justify myself in your eyes, to make an

apology, a declaration and a treaty, all at once.'

'A treaty, at least, must have two sides,' observed Hilda, for she knew now what he was going to say.

'So does an apology,' answered Rex with a laugh. 'To be brief, I apologise to you for having ever so acted as to make you imagine that I was ill disposed towards you; I hereby declare that, far from being an enemy of yours, I would make any personal sacrifice rather than see your marriage hindered; and I propose that we agree henceforth not to imagine any more such things.'

Hilda was satisfied, for she saw that Greif had put the matter plainly. She hesitated a moment.

'What is your first name, Herr Rex?' she asked.

'Horst,' he answered, in some surprise.

'Very well. I agree to all you say. We will be good friends, and you shall be Cousin Horst to me, and I will be Cousin Hilda to you.'

'Thank you,' said Rex.

He wondered why he had ever disliked her, and he even asked himself whether the antipathy he had felt had been real or imaginary. From that time, however, his manner changed and Greif had no further cause of complaint.

The weeks sped on quickly, and the wedding-day came at last. Everything was done very quietly indeed, as was natural and right, considering that the year of mourning had not yet expired. Only when all was over, Greif made a great feast for all the men of the Greifenstein estates, and another in the court of Sigmundskron for the people of the tiny village. And it was to Sigmundskron that Hilda and Greif went first, while Rex and the baroness remained together at Greifenstein. There was as yet no outward change in Hilda's home, though a few rooms had been furnished for the newly-married pair. But the old sitting-room was left as it was for the present, and there Greif and Hilda dined together on the first evening, while

the peasants were feasting beneath the window, in the August moonlight.

Many a long year had passed in melancholy silence since such merriment had been heard within those grey walls, and the people felt instinctively that a new era had begun for them, that there would be life in the old place again, and that the young lord would build up Sigmundskron to be what it had been before. Though not a foot of land remained to the name outside the ramparts, the feudal tradition had not disappeared. Old men were alive whose fathers had told them of the good old Sigmundskrons, how they had been brave in war and kind in peace, and generous till all was gone, and the voices of these drowned the ill-natured remarks of the few who said that the baroness was a miser and had hoarded her gold these twenty years in the deep vault under the haunted north-west tower, upon the brink of the precipice. Moreover, as is the nature of peasants, the sight of the feast warmed their hearts towards those who gave it, even

before the great joints of meat were cut, or the first cask of beer broached. They had never seen such a banquet before. The long tables went all the way round the great courtyard, and not only had each table a fair white cloth, but there was also a fork at every place, and a stone drinking-jug. And in the midst of the open space stood a row of jolly-looking barrels and casks, there was beer and wine, white Schlossberger and red Affenthaler, but the national cherry spirits were conspicuous by their absence, for Greif knew the fierce Black Foresters well. Their iron heads could stand unlimited draughts of any drink except alcohol, as the event proved, for though they drank deep, and were merry to their heart's content, they filed through the gate soberly enough before the clock struck midnight. But before that there was speech-making, and singing, and dancing of reels under the moonlight that mingled softly with the rays of countless paper lanterns. The latter were marvellous in the eyes of the foresters, though some of those who had served in the

army said they had seen the like in Stuttgardt, on the King's birthday, when the Thiergarten was illuminated.

Meanwhile Greif and Hilda sat together by the open window high above the court and looked down upon the merry-making peasants, or talked together. All at once a tremendous voice thundered up from below, imposing silence on the assembly. It was so loud and deep and sonorous that Greif turned his head quickly to see if possible, by the uncertain light, the individual who was capable of making such an enormous noise.

'It is the mayor of Sigmundsdorf,' said Hilda, laughing. 'He has the loudest voice in the world. The people say that when he shouts at Berneck, the fishermen can hear him at Haigerloch in Hohenzollern.'

'I should think they might,' answered Greif.

'And now, gentlemen,' roared the mayor from below, as he addressed the rustics, 'it is our duty to thank the good givers, and to drink to their never-to-be-clouded con-

jugal happiness. From where I stand, gentlemen, I can see the golden moonlight shining upon the silvery hair——'

The mayor interrupted himself with a ponderous cough.

'The silvery moonlight shines upon the golden hair of the high and well-born Fräulein Hilda—I would say, of the high and well-born Frau von Sigmundskron, junior——'

Greif, listening above, drew in his head to suppress a convulsion of laughter, but the crowd applauded the figure of speech, and the mayor bellowed on.

'—— and also upon that of her high and well-born consort and husband, the lord of Sigmundskron.'

The name burst from his lips like a clap of thunder, and Greif grew grave, for it meant something to him.

'And though I could say much more,' continued the mayor, 'I will not, for silence is gold, as the burgomaster of Kalw says. And so, gentlemen, we wish them happiness, a hundred years of life, and a son as hand-

some as themselves for every tower there is on Sigmundskron. Sigmundskron hoch!'

The mayor had seemed to be exerting his full powers during the whole speech, but an unparalleled experience in making noise had taught him the art of reserving a final explosion in the depths of his huge chest, which he knew could never fail to thrill his audience with wonder and delight. His last cheer broke out like the salute of a broadside of cannon, striking the old walls like a battering-ram, till the panes rattled, echoing up to tower and turret, and then reverberating and rolling away among the distant trees, as though it were in haste to fulfil its mission and tell the whole wide forest that Sigmundskron had a lord again, and that Hilda was married to her true love at last.

'Sigmundskron hoch!' yelled the peasants in a wild attempt to rival their leader, which not even their numbers could help them to do.

Then Greif took a tall glass from the table and gave it to Hilda, and took another for himself, and the two stood up in the opening of the Gothic window, the moon-

light falling upon their happy faces and upon the slender goblets in their hands. Another shout went up from below, and then all was still.

'It is we who have to thank you,' said Greif, in clear, ringing tones. 'It is we who come to ask your help to make Sigmundskron what it was in the old days. May you all live to sup with us each year as to-night, for another fifty years! We thank you for your good wishes, and we drink to you all—to our good friend the mayor of Sigmundsdorf and to all the rest. Hoch, Sigmundsdorf! Hoch, the brave foresters! Hoch, the Black Forest we all love! Hoch, the dear Swabian land!'

Hilda's silver voice rang high in the last cheer, and then the two touched their glasses with their lips, while all the people shouted with joy below and the mayor's earth-shaking roars of delight made the great owls in the tower shrink into their holes and blink with wonder.

It was a glorious night, and for many a year the people of Sigmundsdorf will remember the look that was on those two

beautiful young faces that looked down upon them from the high, arched window, and all agreed that the mayor of Sigmundsdorf had never made such a noble speech as on that occasion, or shown the superiority of his voice over all other voices with such brilliant success.

So Hilda and Greif were married, and none but Rex knew what a mortal danger had hung over their happiness until that day. When all was done and ended, Rex drew a long breath and sat down alone to think over the peril from which Greif had escaped. By this time he was fully persuaded that the latter would never be disturbed by the discovery of a letter left by his father, and he had entirely adopted the theory that no such letter had ever existed. It was a comforting belief, and seemed reasonable enough, so that he classified it amongst his convictions and tormented himself no more. He could not help reflecting, however, upon the complications that might arise if such a document should after all find its way into Greif's hands, and as he thought

over the various turns affairs might take he trembled at the responsibility he had assumed. There were delicate points of law involved, concerning which he himself was uncertain.

In the first place, as Greifenstein, Greif was not married at all. His birth was illegitimate, and if he had been married under the name he supposed to be his, the union was not valid. For the law only acknowledges such marriages as take place under the true and lawful names of both parties. If one or the other, though wholly innocent and ignorant of any mistake, turns out to have been married under a wrong appellation, the office is void and of no effect. The question was, whether Greif, as Sigmundskron, was legally Hilda's husband. Rex was inclined to believe that he was. The Heralds' Office might withdraw from him the name and arms of Greifenstein, but Rex did not believe that they could interdict Greif from using those of Sigmundskron, since the Sigmundskrons had themselves conferred them upon him, in his own person, whatever he was before. In

that case Greif was really and truly Sigmundskron, and he was not really anything else, except a nameless orphan. And, if so, the marriage was valid after all. It was a fortunate coincidence which had given a name to a man who really had none at all.

Of course, if no one but Rex were ever to know the secret, there was no danger in store for the young couple. But if any untoward accident should reveal it, or if any other individual were already in possession of it, their case might be bad indeed. Rex could not think of it without experiencing a very unpleasant sensation. He remembered how old Greifenstein had lived during five and twenty years in ignorance of his own shame, and how it had found him out at last. It would be horrible indeed if such a catastrophe should fall upon Greif and Hilda. But it would be better, in the extreme case, that Greif should learn the truth first. If Frau von Sigmundskron should be the first to find it out, it was impossible to foretell what might happen. She would find it hard to believe that Greif had not known

it when he married her daughter; she would remember how he had done his best to refuse Hilda, and she would ascribe that to his knowledge that he was illegitimate; his change of name would look like a piece of deliberate scheming to supply himself with what he most lacked, a name. She would misunderstand all his actions and misconstrue all his intentions; he would appear to her in the light of a clever actor who had made the emotions he really felt serve the greater ends he had so carefully concealed. Rex thought of her behaviour with regard to the name, and he understood the immense value she put upon it; he saw how she had persuaded herself that in Greif her husband's race was to be revived again, and he could guess what she would feel when she discovered that she had conferred what she held most holy on earth, not upon an unfortunate nobleman, but upon a murderer's bastard, who had cleverly robbed her of what she could no longer take back.

Rex thought of the strange fatality which pursued himself and his brother. He him-

self had been the chief cause of the present situation, both by his silence concerning the secret and by his constant efforts to promote the marriage. If he had possessed old Greifenstein's character, he would have acted very differently. He would have told Greif the truth brutally in order to prevent even the distant possibility of such mischief as might now arise. And yet Rex's conscience did not reproach him. He asked himself whether he could possibly have dealt such a blow upon any human being, especially upon one who had suffered, like Greif, almost all that a man can suffer and live. He wondered whether he were amenable to the law for his silence, though he really cared very little about the legality or illegality of his actions in the present case. He felt that both he and his brother were men beyond the pale of common laws, pursued by an evil destiny that did not quite leave them even in their happiness. He went back to his own father's story from its first beginning, and beyond that to the untimely death of the father of old

Greifenstein, which had led to the second marriage of the latter's mother, and so to the birth of Rieseneck with all his woes and miserable deeds; then to the early quarrels of the two half-brothers, to their separation, to the singular state of things in which Greifenstein hardly knew of his brother's marriage and never saw the face of his brother's wife; then onward to Rieseneck's surrender of the arsenal guard, to his imprisonment, escape and exile, followed by his wife's unlawful marriage to the brother of her living husband, then to the evil fatality which had sent a child in this false union to inherit so much shame and horror, to be saved from it, so far at least, by his unknown brother, appearing as his cousin, Rex, the traitor's son. In such a train of destiny, what might not be yet in store for Horst von Rieseneck and for his brother Greif von Sigmundskron?

Rex almost smiled as he gave to each, in his imagination, the only name that was lawfully his—he smiled at the ingenuity of fate in finding so much mischief to do.

CHAPTER XXIV

Rex was mistaken in his opinion concerning the letter. Before he died old Greifenstein had actually written it, as he had intended to do, and had directed it to his son. It is not yet time to explain what became of it, but in order to make this history more clear, it is as well to state at once that it was not destroyed, but was actually in existence at the time of Greif's marriage to Hilda.

It is necessary, however, to consider the development of Rex's character during the year which followed the wedding, in order to understand the events which afterwords occurred. It had been his intention to undertake a journey to South America, when all was settled, in order to wind up

his father's affairs, and ascertain the extent of the fortune he inherited. He was well aware that he was very rich, but as this was nothing new to him, and as he had always had whatever he wished, he was in no hurry to find out the exact amount of his income. The property was well administered, too, and there was no danger of loss, as Rieseneck had taken pains to provide against every contingency before making his last voyage to Europe. Rex was personally acquainted with the persons to whom his father had confided the management of his wealth, and so soon as they were informed of the latter's death, they took all the legal steps necessary to secure the inheritance, and remitted large sums of money to the heir at regular intervals and with scrupulous exactness.

At first his situation seemed rather a strange one, and he did not exactly know what to do. Immediately after the marriage he found himself at Greifenstein alone with Hilda's mother, who submitted to the arrangement readily enough. It was na-

tural, she said, that the young people should wish to be left to themselves for some time. They had declared that when they were ready for society they would drive over from Sigmundskron, and bring back the baroness and Rex. These two, being both exceedingly methodical persons, agreed very well, and they found plenty to talk about in the possibilities of the future. Rex was utterly indifferent to solitude or company, but since the baroness was to be his companion, he took some trouble to make himself agreeable. She, on her part, knew well enough that the days when she could be constantly with Hilda were over, and she was glad that her son-in-law had such a man as Rex for his cousin. For Rex was far too tactful to parade his philosophic views in the presence of a lady whose practical religion he admired and respected, so that the only point upon which the two could have differed seriously was carefully avoided. An odd sort of intimacy sprang up between them, which neither had anticipated. Frau von Sigmundskron was sur-

prised to find in Rex so much ready sympathy with her ideas, for her German soul would have been naturally inclined to find fault with a man who had been brought up in South America, and whose father could not have been supposed capable of teaching him much sound morality. Nor would it have seemed likely that her somewhat narrow, though elevated view of things in general would find a ready appreciation in one whose great breadth of understanding had made him familiar with all manner of heretically modern notions. She did not comprehend his nature, but she was satisfied in his society.

There are, perhaps, no persons more agreeable to live with than those few who have become conservative through excessive and constant change. They bring back with them to the land of stabilities an intimate practical knowledge of what instability really means, which distinguishes them from people who have lived within the shadow of their own steeple through a lifetime of dogged tradition-worship. Rex

had tried everything that the world can give, except fame, which was beyond his reach, and, at forty years of age, he had a decided preference for old-fashioned people. His placid disposition liked their quiet ways and abhorred all sorts of trivial excitement; he was a man who was intimately conscious of the inanity of most forms of amusement, and of the emptiness of most kinds of sensations. The cold, still depths of his heart could not be warmed to a pleasurable heat by the small emotions which the world covets, and so eagerly pursues. He sometimes wondered what would happen if he were really roused. He had not often been angry in his life, but he had noticed, with his habit of self-observation, that his anger seldom failed to produce tangible results, even when it was half assumed. It was natural to suppose that if he should ever be goaded to madness, he might turn out to be a very dangerous animal, but such a case appeared to him extremely improbable, because he could scarcely conceive of anything

which could affect his temper for more than a few minutes. It is certainly true that persons who do not indulge their passions are less exposed to be assailed by them at every turn, though the capacity for passion itself in extreme cases increases in an opposite ratio.

Rex and Frau von Sigmundskron became intimate, therefore, and grew more fond of each other's company than they had expected to be. But they were not left long to their solitary state in Greifenstein. At the end of a week, Greif and Hilda appeared, more radiant in their new happiness than before. They proposed that Rex and the baroness should come over to Sigmundskron for a month, after which they announced their intention of travelling for some time.

Hilda had given Rex her hand, which according to German custom she could not do before she was married. He had almost dreaded to touch it when he saw it before him, so strong was still the first impression he had taken so much pains to conquer. Strangely enough, this was the last

time he ever felt a return of his old antipathy. It seemed as though the contact of Hilda's gloved fingers had wrought a change in him. He looked up and saw a smile upon her face.

'Do you hate me still?' she asked.

'No,' he answered, and there was no mistaking his tone.

He did not hate her any more, it was true, but he felt unaccountably embarrassed by her presence. He was silent, preoccupied, strangely dull and unresponsive.

'Why do you never talk before Hilda?' asked Greif, in his straightforward way, when they had all been a week at Sigmundskron together.

'Men are often silent before nature's greatest works,' said Rex quietly, and without looking at Hilda as he spoke.

'Do you hear that enormous compliment?' asked Greif, addressing her.

'I do not understand it,' answered Hilda, with a laugh. 'I believe he hates me still!'

'No,' he answered gravely, 'you are quite

mistaken, and I was not thinking of making compliments.'

'But it is true, since Greif has spoken of it,' Hilda said. 'You do not talk when I am present, though both Greif and my mother say that no one talks better. What does it mean, when a man is silent, Greif?'

'It generally means that he is in love.'

'With me?' Hilda laughed gaily at the thought, which conveyed no more idea of possibility to her than it did to Greif, or even, at that moment, to Rex himself.

'I should be, if I were Greif,' Rex answered, pretending to laugh a little.

He thought of what had been said, when he was alone, and there seemed nothing laughable in it. On the contrary, he was angry with Greif for suggesting a thought which had certainly not occurred to him before. He knew well enough, now that he considered the matter, that there was no inherent reason in the nature of things why he might not fall in love with Hilda, and it struck him rather forcibly that he occasionally acted as though he were in that

condition, or at least as he might have done, had he been in love at twenty. But he was twice that age, and there was an evident discrepancy between his behaviour and his reasoning, which rendered the supposition utterly absurd. He did not believe that a man could be in love in the smallest degree without being aware of it, and he felt that if he were aware that he loved his brother's wife, he should forthwith leave the country for ever. Moreover, until very lately he had believed that he positively disliked Hilda, and it would be strange indeed if a strong antipathy had thus suddenly developed into a sentiment capable of suggesting Greif's careless remark. Rex promised himself that when they met that evening at dinner his behaviour should be very different. It was true that he had not thought much about the matter, until Hilda had asked the cause of his silence. He was in the habit of holding his tongue when he had nothing to say, unlike many younger men. He was also aware that he admired Hilda's beauty, as he had always done, even

when he had most disliked her personality. The flash of her eyes and hair as she had rushed to the bed where Greif was almost dying, had produced a permanent impression upon Rex, much at variance with what he had felt towards herself, as distinguished from her outward appearance. He had next attributed his antipathy to jealousy of her; he wondered, now, how he could have made such a blunder. He had nothing but gratitude for her now, for the share she had taken in saving his brother's life, nothing but gratitude and a certain brotherly affection, as undefined as his dislike had been before.

Rex thought he was losing the use of his faculties, or falling into a premature dotage since he could waste so much thought over such an insignificant point, and he made up his mind, after all, not to attempt any determined change in his conduct, but to talk or hold his peace as the spirit moved him. The result was that he talked exceptionally well, very much to his own surprise. Before many days were past he found that he had

so completely altered his behaviour, that he was now generally silent when Hilda was not present, whereas her coming was the signal for him to exhibit an almost unnatural brilliancy.

'I amuse them,' he said to himself, with some satisfaction. 'They are pleased, and that is enough.'

Hilda and Greif carried out their intention of travelling during the autumn. To Greif it seemed impossible that Hilda should any longer remain in total ignorance of the outer world. They would go away, in the first place, for three months, and they would all be back together for an old-fashioned Christmas in Sigmundskron. Their absence would give time for a few of the more essential repairs to be made in the castle, before undertaking the extensive restorations that were necessary. Frau von Sigmundskron had said that she would stay behind and superintend as well as she could.

'And what will you do, Rex?' asked Greif.

'I will help Aunt Therese,' answered the other.

'Why do you not go somewhere and amuse yourself?'

'That is easier said than done. My amusement will consist in counting the days until you come back. We shall both do that.'

'Why not go and stay at Greifenstein as you both did before? It is more comfortable.'

'I prefer this. There is a better view. I think I will buy the top of the hill over there, and lay the foundation of an observatory. It will be an occupation, and they send me so much money that I do not know what to do with it.'

'I hope you are not going to build a house to live in,' said Greif suddenly. 'Remember that your home is here.'

'Thank you,' answered Rex.

The words were pleasant to him, for in the last month he had begun to feel an attachment for Sigmundskron which he had never felt for any place before. The mere idea of leaving it was painful to him, and

if he must be parted for a time from Greif and Hilda—he coupled their names in his thoughts, and rather obstinately too — he knew that the time would pass more quickly in the old castle than anywhere else. At forty years of age, the idea of beginning again the wandering life he had led so long, rambling from one country and capital to another, now spending a year at a university and then six months in Paris, or a winter in St. Petersburg, never settled, never at home, though at home everywhere — the mere thought was painfully repugnant. To live with Greif and Hilda in their ancient home, to build at last the noble observatory of which he had often idly dreamed, and to spend the best years of life that remained to him in peaceful study among those he loved, was a prospect infinitely attracting, and apparently most easy of realisation.

When Hilda and Greif were gone, Rex discovered that they were really the central figures in his visions of future happiness. The emptiness they left behind was inde-

scribably dreary. He wondered why he had not experienced the same sensation when he and the baroness had stayed at Greifenstein after the wedding. He had not missed the two so painfully then; indeed he had enjoyed the baroness's society very much, and would not then have been altogether sorry to have been left with her for a longer time. But the month they had spent at Sigmundskron had produced a great change, it seemed. Before that, he had assuredly not been in the habit of thinking so much about Greif and Hilda, nor, in Greifenstein, had he expected to meet them at every turn, in every dusky corner, when he walked through the house alone, as was the case now. It was quite certain that they had not formerly haunted his dreams; whereas now he could not close his eyes without seeing Hilda's face, and Greif's beside it.

Though their absence was more than disagreeable to Rex, he was, on the whole, rather pleased than otherwise when he discovered how much he regretted their presence. Until lately he had never missed

anybody, nor cared whether he were alone or in company. He could not have looked forward with so much satisfaction to passing the rest of his life with Greif and Hilda if he had not cared for their society. The prospect would have been repugnant instead of attractive in that case, and he would have preferred to build a house of his own. He was delighted at the glimpse of the future afforded him during the past month, and he was satisfied with the position he was to occupy in the house. He was old enough to love Greif and Hilda in a somewhat fatherly way, though he looked so young. After all, a man of forty could be father to a girl of nineteen, and it was a pleasant privilege to call her cousin Hilda, and to treat her as a sort of niece. Rex supposed that before long his brown hair and beard would begin to turn grey. He looked forward to feeling himself older and wiser than Hilda and Greif, as indeed he might, and he intended to take great interest in the education of their children, who would look up to him as to something between a grandfather and an

uncle in ten or fifteen years' time. It would be very delightful to teach Hilda's children —and Greif's, and there was nothing to hinder Rex from building his observatory if he pleased.

Of one thing he grew very certain, namely, that life without Greif or Hilda would be intolerable. Fortunately he found sympathy in this thought on the part of Frau von Sigmundskron, who missed the two as much as Rex, though perhaps in a very different way. They talked of nothing but what should be done when the pair came back at Christmas, unless the post had brought one of those short, businesslike efforts of affection which happy couples send to their parents during the first months of wedded bliss. On those occasions the two sat together discussing the letter as long as there remained in it a word to talk about. Rex would then launch out into vivid descriptions of the town or country whence the news came, supplying every deficiency in the correspondence out of the inexhaustible stores of his memory, telling his companion

all that Hilda and Greif must have seen and done, even though they had forgotten to give a full account of their proceedings. The baroness enjoyed these conversations quite as much as though she had received longer letters, but Rex was conscious of an odd impulse to fill up by an effort of his imagination the numerous lacunæ in the sequence of news. He was aware that his disappointment when no letter came was greater than he had expected, and that it increased until he felt a positive, painful anxiety at the hour when the mail came in.

But though the days sometimes dragged wearily along, they were over at last, and Hilda and Greif came back. They received a great ovation on their return, and the Christmas that followed was a merry one, but no one was so glad to welcome the two home again as Rex. His face was so much changed by his delight that Greif hardly recognised him for the man he had left behind three months ago. As had sometimes happened, though very rarely, his eyes had lost their stony impenetrability for

a few moments; the pupils dilated and were full of light; and there was an extraordinary brilliancy about Rex's usually unruffled features, which surprised Hilda herself.

Rex looked at her, too, and he saw that a transformation had taken place. He could not tell whether he preferred the girlish simplicity of three months ago, or the fuller beauty of to-day. The dress made a difference, also, for though simple still, and severe, what Hilda wore was the work of more skilful hands than her own or old Berbel's. There was a difference between unintentional simplicity, and the simplicity of a refined taste, as in Hilda's self Rex would soon discover the change from the girl to the woman.

Rex did not conceal his gladness, and it was in itself a source of pleasure to the two who had come back. During the first few days there was endless festivity and endless talk about all they had seen and done. There was much to say on both sides, and small time to say it, for it was the Christmas season, and the Sigmundskrons were

determined to make it a happy one for all their people. But when Twelfth Night was gone by, and quietness descended upon the four occupants of the castle, they found that they had succeeded in telling each other much more than they supposed, in the intervals between Christmas trees, and dinners for the peasantry, and all the pleasant noise and excitement of the Yuletide. Very soon their lives dropped into peaceful channels again, and upon the tidal wave of merriment succeeded the calm flow of an untroubled existence. There was no end to the work to be done upon the castle, and Greif entered upon it with boundless enthusiasm, while Rex helped him at every turn with his extraordinary knowledge of all matters in which exactness was required. Hilda marvelled at his amazing versatility and at the apparent depth of his information upon so many matters. No question came amiss to him connected with the restoration, from the customs and mode of life of the mediæval Germans to the calculation of a Gothic arch or a winding staircase.

'You seem to know everything,' said Hilda one day, unable to conceal her admiration.

'It is a matter of habit,' Rex answered vaguely, whereat she laughed, scarcely knowing why.

'I mean,' said Rex, explaining himself, 'that you are in the habit of supposing that a man only understands his own profession, whereas if he really does understand it, he ought not to find any difficulty in acquiring the rudiments of any other which does not need special gifts. Everything which depends upon mathematics is more or less connected in a mathematical mind.'

'That sounds very reasonable. I wish I had a mathematical mind.'

'You have what is better,' answered Rex, looking at her.

'What is that?'

'Many things. Ask Greif.'

His tone had changed, and he spoke so seriously that she was surprised, for she did not in the least comprehend his mood. It was strange to himself, and he afterwards

wondered whether his own words had any sense in them, unwilling to allow that he had spoken out of the fulness of an admiration he had no right to express. He did not say, even to himself, that she was the most beautiful woman, the best, the kindest he had ever known, but at the thought of what he would have said in his own heart, had all restraint been removed, he felt a shock, such as a man feels who strikes his hand against some unexpected sharp object in the dark, and draws back, groping his way carefully lest he should hurt himself again.

Certain it was that his admiration of Hilda threatened to pass the bounds by which admiration of any sort is separated from the stronger feelings that lie beyond it. But as he perceived this in the course of time, he explained it away by telling himself that it was natural and harmless. Loving his brother as he did, it would have been strange if he had not felt something like devotion for the woman who had saved his brother's life. It would have been astonish-

ing if he had not felt a most sincere affection for her, if he had not been willing to sacrifice anything for her.

It was an odd sort of devotion at first, for it grew up like a tender plant surrounded on all sides by sharp pricks, straight in self-defence, and sensitive by avoiding all contact with things hurtful. Rex became conscious of its growth, and was surprised to find anything so delicate and beautiful in his own heart, where such beauties had never grown, or had budded only to wither prematurely, leaving the ground more dry and arid and unpromising than before. It was as though a soft light had dawned in his soul and was gradually brightening into day. From having distrusted himself a little at first, he put an unbounded faith in his own heart since he saw what it contained. He would even talk to Greif by the hour together of Hilda's perfections, vying with her husband in discovering new things to praise, and utterly happy in the freedom of speaking about her which he thus enjoyed.

He fancied that he looked upon her

almost as though she had been his daughter, and he imagined that he understood stories he had read, and cases he had known in his own experience, where such pure affections were concerned. He, who was far from imaginative by nature, made romances in the air, in which he fancied that he had once been married to a woman he had loved to distraction—a woman not unlike Hilda, perhaps—and that Hilda herself was the daughter of that union, all there was left to remind him of her who was dead. There was something oddly fantastic in the thought, which satisfied him for a time, and made his life seem full of a love, tender, regretful, expressing itself in a boundless devotion to the one object which recalled it.

And the dead woman grew in his fancy, until she became very lifelike. He could remember how he had closed her darkened eyes, and smoothed her yellow hair, how he had buried her on a dark winter's day, among the fir trees, and how through long years he had mourned for her, while Hilda was a little child at his knee. It was all

fancy, but it was very vivid. Then he could go back still farther, he could recall the sound of her voice, for Hilda's own reminded him of it, and out of the misty echoes of past time he could reconstruct conversations, phrases of love, words full of meaning. He remembered their first meeting, in an ancient castle in a distant land —he had been a guest in her father's house —so long ago. He remembered how they had ridden together so often through a dim forest, and how the echo of the horses' hoofs amongst the ringing trees had broken upon the silvery music of her voice. It all came back to him, the scene, the colour of the shadows ; the snort of the horses, the curves of her figure as she sat so straight in the saddle, the silences that said more than words. Then the scene changed, and they were upon a moonlit lawn in summer. He was standing still, and she was coming towards him through the misty light. His heart beat fast. Slender and tall as a fair spirit she advanced. Her two hands were held out before her, and found his. Face to

face they stood in silence, their gaze meeting—was it to be, or not? Then, in that wonderful moment, he felt his own hard eyes soften and saw the warm light in hers. Not a word was spoken, as his arms went round her—then they turned and walked together upon the dark, dewless grass, beneath the summer moon.

And again, he was with her upon a balcony at night. In the warm dusk he could see the whiteness of her face, and the outline of her figure. She had said something, and he had felt the hot blood surging to his forehead, and falling again, as by its own weight, upon his heart. All at once he had answered her with such words as he had not guessed a man could speak, for they had broken forth in a passionate eloquence, unrestrained and fresh with young life, as words first spoken can be. He could not always remember them now; the heartfelt ring of them waked him from his sleep, sometimes; and again, in the midst of the occupations of the day, the stirring echo of their music filled the room in a moment and was gone

before he could seize it, or was blown into his ear by the clear breeze that swept the valley.

The dead woman was alive—the woman who had never lived save in his brain—and Hilda was growing to be like her. Rex watched them both, her whom he saw with open eyes, and her who was present with him the instant his eyes were closed. No daughter was ever so exact an image of the mother who had born her; line for line, the features grew to be the same, shade for shade the colour of the one became the colour of the other, coil for coil the yellow hair of both was wound alike upon the noble head. And the love of this dead woman, who had never breathed, but whom he had buried with such bitter tears and such heartbroken grief, filled his whole being and twined itself through all the mazes of his complex nature, till no action of his life was independent of it, and no thought free from its all-dominating influence.

In the first beginnings of this creation of his fancy he had found such peace and such

sweet melancholy satisfaction that he had encouraged its growth and had tried to persuade himself of its reality. And the reality had come, so far as it can come to anything wholly built up in the imagination. It had also brought with it its consequences, unless it could be said to be a consequence in itself. Rex's devotion to Hilda increased with every day, as she seemed to him to be more and more like the woman he had loved, the mother he had imagined for her in place of her own. For it was out of Hilda herself that his love for a shadow had grown to be what it was, and the shadow itself was but the reflexion of Hilda's present brightness upon the misty emptiness of his own past life.

Rex was very happy. The dreams that filled the hours did not hinder his actions; on the contrary, the latter seemed to be supplied at last with the purpose they had lacked during forty years, the purpose to honour the love that was in him, and to please Hilda, the outcome of that love. All that he did seemed to acquire directness and

perfection of detail, all that he said was dignified by a tender thought for this child of an adored vision, until those who lived with him were amazed at his wisdom and kindness, and wondered whether the world had ever held his like before.

The busy months went by and the summer was at hand. Much had been done to Sigmundskron, but there was work for years to come, before it should be what Greif dreamed of. But one day in June the work ceased suddenly, and all was hushed and still. The servants trod noiselessly and spoke in whispers, and Rex found himself left to his own devices with no companion but the dear idol of his fancy. The whole household life seemed suspended.

It was the silence of a great happiness. On that fair June morning Hilda had born her husband an heir to Sigmundskron.

CHAPTER XXV

Berbel, transformed into the housekeeper of Sigmundskron, was busy with the preparations for the christening. A year of uninterrupted prosperity had made her a trifle more sleek than before, and though she still affected a Spartan simplicity of dress, her frock was made of better materials than formerly, and her cap was adorned with black ribbands of real silk.

The day was warm, and Berbel came out into the court to breathe the air. As she stood at the door trying to remember whether she had forgotten anything, a man entered the gate and strode across the pavement. It was Wastei, and he carried in his hand a magnificent string of trout, threaded by the gills upon a willow withe. He bore

his burden very carefully, and it was clear that he had gone home to dress himself after catching the trout and before coming to the castle, for he was splendidly arrayed in a pair of new leather breeches and he wore a velvet coat, the like of which had not been seen in Sigmundsdorf within the memory of man, for, like Berbel's ribbands, it was of real silk. Berbel eyed him curiously. She had an odd liking for the fellow.

'God greet you, Frau Berbel,' said Wastei with far more politeness than he vouchsafed to most people, high or low. 'I have brought these fish for the christening feast, and I have seen worse.'

Berbel took the willow wand from his hand, tried the weight, counted the trout with a housewife's eye, tried the weight again, and then nodded approvingly.

'They are good fish,' she said, looking them over once more.

Wastei drew a bright red handkerchief from his pocket, and carefully wiped his sinewy brown hands. Then without further ceremony he sat down upon the stone

curb at the corner of the steps, as though he had done his business and meant to rest himself without paying any more attention to Berbel. She liked him for his independence and taciturnity. Moreover, in the old days of starving poverty, Wastei had done her many a good service she had never been able to reward, and had brought many a plump hare and many a brace of quails to the empty larder, swearing that he had come by them honestly, and offering to exchange them for a little mending to his tattered clothes. Berbel used to suspect that Wastei knew more of the nakedness of the land than he admitted, and that he risked more than one dangerous bit of poaching out of secret pity for the poor ladies who were known to buy so little food in the village. They were better off now, both she and Wastei, but as she looked at the broad expanse of black velvet that covered his square, flat back, she remembered the days when he had come ragged to the back door to throw down a good meal of game upon the kitchen table, going

off the next minute with nothing but a bit of black bread in prospect for his supper.

'I will take them to the baron myself,' said Berbel.

Wastei looked up as though he had supposed she was already gone in.

'Thank you, Frau Berbel,' he answered.

Five minutes later she returned, carrying a black bottle, a glass and something small shut in the palm of her hand.

'The baron thanks you and sends you this,' she said, holding out a gold piece. 'And I have brought you this,' she added, filling the glass, 'because I know you like it.'

'Luck!' ejaculated Wastei, slipping the twenty-mark piece into the pocket of his waistcoat, and watching the white liquor as it rose nearer to the brim.

He took the glass, twisted it in his fingers, held it to the sun, and then looked again at Berbel.

'God greet,' he said, and tossed off the liquor in a trice. 'Luck!' he exclaimed again, as he smacked his lips.

'Why do you say luck, in that way?' asked the good woman.

'I will tell you, Frau Berbel,' answered Wastei, lowering his tone. 'It is the new coat that brought me luck to-day.'

'It is a good coat,' observed Berbel, in her usual manner.

'Well, I came by it through a gold piece and a drink of that same good stuff.'

'Cheap. It is a good coat.'

'Do you remember, after the devil had flown away with the old wolf of Greifenstein——'

'Hush, for mercy's sake!' exclaimed Berbel. 'You must not talk like that——'

'He was a wolf. I believe he would have torn a poor free-shot like me to pieces if he could. I had him after me once, and I remember his eyes. If he had been ten years younger, and if I had not dropped through a hole I knew of so that he thought I had fallen over the Falcon Stone beyond Zavelstein, he would have caught me. He looked for my body two days with his keepers. Well, the devil got him, as you know, for

he killed himself. And after that the young lord was ill and you sent me off at night for news, because Fräulein Hilda could not sleep. Well, you remember how I brought back the bad news, and a gold piece Herr Rex had given me, and which I supposed must be for your ladies because they had not many at that time, though I thought it queer. Good, and the baroness said it must be for me—you remember all that?'

'Very well,' replied Berbel, suppressing a smile by force of habit.

'So I took the gold piece, but I would not use it nor change it, for I said it was the price of bad news, though I owed the host at the Ox three marks and a half at the time. I took my gold piece and I put it in a safe place, where nobody would have thought of looking for it.'

'Where was that?' asked Berbel, as he paused.

'Well, if you want to know, I will tell you. There is a place in the forest, called Waldeck, where there is a ruined castle, and before the gate there are three trees and a

stump of an old tree farther on—it is all thick and full of brushwood and pines and birches, so that my three trees look very much like the others, but when you have found them, you must take a straight line from the right hand one to the stump—you will find it if you look, and then go on past the stump about a hundred ells, always straight, and then you will come to a flat stone; and the stone is loose so that it turns round easily, if you are strong enough to move it, and underneath it there is a deep hole. I put my gold piece at the bottom of this hole and set a heavy stone upon it, and then I got out and drew the big stone into its place, and went away. I did not think that any one would be likely to look for a twenty-mark piece just in that spot.'

'Improbable,' assented Berbel, her massive mouth twitching with amusement.

'Very. And I said to myself, Wastei, you're a brave fellow, and you shall starve to death rather than use the gold which is the price of bad news; but if the son of the old wolf gets well, and marries Frau Berbel's

young lady, and if the good God sends them a boy, then, Wastei, you shall go and get the gold piece and spend it at the christening. You see Herr Rex had given me a drink with the money, just as you did, so that there was a chance of its turning out well after all, and I knew that—because if there had been no chance, why then, money is money, after all.'

'And so now you have bought a coat with it?'

'And what a coat! The Jew had had it in his shop for six months, but nobody could buy it because it was so dear.'

'The Jew?' inquired Berbel, looking sharply at Wastei.

'Yes—and do you know what I think, Frau Berbel?' Wastei lowered his voice to a whisper.

'What?'

'I believe it is the coat the old wolf died in, and that is the reason it brings me luck.'

'What makes you think that?' inquired his companion, knitting her rough brows.

'There is a spot on the collar — here.' Wastei moved closer to her and presented himself sideways to Berbel pointing out the place with his finger. 'The Jew said it was from a rusty nail, or that it might be an ink-spot—but he is only a Jew. That is not rust, nor ink, Frau Berbel. That is the old wolf's last blood--on the right side, just under the ear. He would have shot me for a poacher, if he could, Frau Berbel. Well, I have got his coat, with his own mark on it.'

Berbel shuddered slightly, strong though she was. She liked Wastei, but she had often guessed that there was a latent ferocity in him which would come out some day.

'And how could the coat have come to the Jew's shop?' she asked, after a pause.

'You know they had a houseful of servants, all thieves from the city, and they were always getting new ones, instead of keeping honest folk from the estate. The young lord sent them all away and took his own people, God bless him. But

on the night when they all died, the servants were alone in the house, before your lady got over there, and when she did, she could not do everything. I have heard that they buried them all in fine clothes. Well, in the confusion, you may be sure that one of the servants stole the coat with the blood on it, and as he expected to stay in the house, and could not have worn it himself, he took it to the Jew and sold it for what he could get. You see it looks likely, because the Jew would have waited at least a year before trying to sell it, for fear of being caught.'

'That is true,' said Berbel thoughtfully.

'I would not have told the story to any one else,' observed Wastei. 'But as you know everything, you may as well know this too.'

'What? Is there anything more?'

'Nothing particular,' answered Wastei. 'Except that there was a hole in the pocket,' he added carelessly. 'You see it was not quite new, or I could not have got it for twenty marks.'

'So there was a hole in the pocket,' said Berbel. 'Do you want me to mend it for you?'

'No. I think I will leave it, for luck. Besides it is convenient, if I should want to let anything slip through, between the velvet and the lining.'

'That is true,' observed Berbel, watching him intently.

'A thing might lie a long time between the velvet and the lining of a coat in a Jew's shop,' remarked Wastei presently.

'Very long.'

'Long enough for people not to want it, when it is found.'

'It depends on what it is.'

'A ticket for a lottery, for instance, would not be of much use after a year or two.'

'Not much, as you say,' assented Berbel, keeping her eye upon him.

'Or an old letter, either,' said Wastei with perfect indifference.

'That depends on the person to whom it is addressed.'

'A live son is better than a dead father. A message from the dead wolf would not make the christening of his grandson any merrier, would it, Frau Berbel?'

'Better leave dead people alone,' she answered, thoughtfully rubbing the mole on her chin.

'In God's peace,' said Wastei, lifting his small hat from his head. 'Or wherever else they may be,' he added, putting it on again.

There was a pause, during which Berbel reflected upon the situation, and Wastei leaned back against the grey wall, watching a hawk that was circling above the distant crags.

'What will you do with it?' asked Berbel, at last.

'Burn it, or give it to you—whichever you like.'

'You have not read it?'

'It is not the sign-board of an inn—if it were, I could. Besides, it is sealed. There is writing on the back, and I think there is a capital G among the letters. You

see there was more than the spot on the collar to tell me whose the coat was.'

'It is true that the baron always expected to find a letter from his father,' said Berbel. 'It looks probable, this story of yours.'

'Do you want the paper?'

'Yes. I will keep it in a safe place. In ten years, when there is no more sorrow about the old people, the baron may like to know that his father thought of him.'

'Better burn it,' suggested Wastei, pulling out a match-box, and fumbling in his unfamiliar pockets for the letter.

'I am not sure of that,' said Berbel, who knew that if she insisted, he would destroy it in spite of her. 'After all, Wastei, it is neither yours nor mine.'

'I bought it with the coat. I can burn it if I like,' said Wastei, striking a match and watching the white flame in the sunshine.

'Of course you can, if you like,' replied Berbel unmoved.

'Well, if you want it, there it is,' he said, throwing away the match and handing her the letter. 'Do not spoil the christening with it, Frau Berbel.'

She took the envelope with a great show of indifference and looked attentively at the superscription.

'Is it what I thought?' inquired Wastei.

'To my son Greif. That is what is written on it.'

'It is like the old wolf's manner,' said the other. 'He might have said Greifenstein at least. But I suppose the devil was in a hurry and could not wait for him to write it out. I am sure I would not have waited so long. God greet you, Frau Berbel.'

Wastei nodded and strode across the sunny court, well satisfied with himself. He had planned the whole meeting, with the useless craftiness of a born woodman. Several days had elapsed since he had bought the coat and found the letter in the lining. In spite of his pretended ignorance he could read well enough to

make out the address, and he had come to the conclusion that Berbel was the person to be trusted. He would not for the world have destroyed the precious missive, but he was equally determined neither to keep it himself nor to mar the joy of the Sigmundskrons' festivities by putting it into Greif's own hands. He had known Berbel for many years and he was sure of her discretion. She would keep it until the proper moment was come, and would give it to the right person in the end. But he had not been able to resist the temptation of making a profound mystery of the matter and he prided himself upon the effective way in which he had executed his scheme. Three words would have sufficed, but he had passed more than half an hour very agreeably in Berbel's company. And Berbel, little guessing the tremendous import of what she held in her hand, had been interested by the long story. It did not enter her mind that the letter could be anything but a word of affectionate farewell, at the time Wastei gave it into her

keeping. Intelligent and keen as she was, for a woman of her class, it nevertheless did not occur to her that she was putting into her pocket the key to the mystery of eighteen months ago. The baroness had never spoken to her familiarly about the tragedy, and she took it for granted that the catastrophe was fully understood by the survivors, though they chose to keep its cause a secret among themselves. Hilda had indeed told her that poor Greif had received no message from his father, but as the baroness had never mentioned the letter to Rex, she supposed that both were in the same position.

Berbel carried the paper to her own room and put it into a strong wooden box with her own most sacred belongings, the few relics of her husband which she possessed, a dozen letters written to her during the war, an old button from his uniform, a faded bit of ribbon which had carried the medal for the war of 1866, and which she had once replaced with a new one, a pair of his old soldier's gloves and a lock of his hair.

It was all she had left of him, for he had fallen among hundreds and had been buried in the common trench. She envied her mistress nothing in the world except the two swords and the leathern helmet that had been Sigmundskron's—poor woman! Her husband had fought as bravely and had fallen on the same honourable field as his master, but she had nothing of his, but a little hair, a bit of ribband, a tarnished button and a pair of worn-out gloves. The rough-browed, hard-faced woman kissed each of her poor relics in turn before she closed the box, and the tears were in her eyes as she hid the key away.

She had not decided what to do with the letter, but on the whole it seemed wiser not to deliver it on that day. Indeed it would be almost impossible to do so, for any one not absolutely tactless and careless of others' feelings. Berbel was by no means sure, however, whether she should be justified in keeping it more than a few days. After all, it might possibly contain some message, or some especial injunction which Greif ought

to receive at once. To keep such a document concealed for any length of time would have been wholly unjustifiable. On the other hand, Berbel was not sure how such a disclosure might affect Greif. So far as she knew, his illness had been caused by the shock of his father's and mother's deaths, and it could not be foreseen whether a circumstance which must remind him so vividly of that catastrophe might not cause a return of the malady which had attacked his brain. Berbel wished she could consult some one and get good advice in the matter. The wisest person in the house was Rex, but for many reasons she would not go to him. It was not unnatural that, in her position, she should distrust Rex to a certain extent. In the first place, he was the only member of the household with whom she had not been acquainted for years, and he was consequently the stranger in the establishment. Then, too, though he was so exceedingly clever, she could not grow accustomed to his eyes, and their expressionless stare haunted her when she was alone.

Berbel did not believe that a man who looked almost blind and nevertheless saw so much better than other people could be really good and honest, since his appearance itself was a deception. How could a man have eyes with no pupils in them, and yet be able to tell a swift from a swallow as well as Wastei himself and at as great a distance? There was evidently something wrong about Rex, and Berbel preferred to trust any other member of the household.

For the rest, there was the baroness and there was Hilda. Either of them would give her good advice without doubt, but it was necessary to choose between them. Berbel was inclined to select Hilda, for she felt more at her ease with her than with Frau von Sigmundskron herself. Moreover it was natural to imagine that Hilda would understand Greif better than any one else, now that they had been married during nearly a year. On the other hand, the baroness was older and wiser, though not so wise as Rex. The balance lay between

the sympathy Berbel felt for the one, and the unbounded respect she felt for the other. She had taken care of Hilda from a child, and the girl had grown up feeling that Berbel was more a friend than a servant, as indeed she was; whereas the baroness, though sincerely attached to the good creature to whom she owed so much, and although overflowing with kindness towards her, could not get rid of the idea of all distinctions so far as to talk intimately with her upon family matters. This consideration, of which Berbel was well aware, ultimately turned the scale, and she determined to go to Hilda with the letter, while regretting that a lingering distrust of Rex's character prevented her from appealing to his fabulous wisdom.

The christening was a very grand ceremony, in the eyes of the village folk, and everything was done in the most approved fashion. It not being the custom in Germany to baptize children as soon as they are born, and as the anniversary of the wedding was not far distant, it was agreed

to choose that day for giving a name to the heir of Sigmundskron.

'Call him Greif,' said the baroness, 'after his father.'

'Call him Kraft, for his grandfather,' said Berbel to Hilda, when they were alone.

'He has bright eyes,' said Greif. 'He shall be Sigmund.'

And Sigmund he was called. Rex said nothing at first and could not be induced to give any opinion in the matter, though he strongly supported Greif's suggestion after it was once made.

Rex was thinking and his thoughts were very much confused. He would have greatly preferred to spend the festal day in solitude, but this was not possible, and he did his best to join in the rejoicings with a glad face. His efforts were successful, and he made a speech at the family dinner, half jesting, half in earnest, as he proposed Hilda's health, and the child's.

'I am much more accustomed to speaking in public, than you would imagine,' he said, 'for I have often made long speeches among

students, of which the beginning was beer, the middle beer and the end more beer. For that matter, Greif has done the same, and I have been among those who applauded his eloquence. This, however, is a very different affair—as you will no doubt perceive. For, instead of students, I have two noble dames and a philistine for my audience, and instead of beer and Alma Mater, I have for a subject the beauty, the virtues and the deeds of Sigmund von Sigmundskron and of his own especial alma mater, his dear mother. I must trust to her, in the unavoidable absence of Baron Sigmund, due to a tendency to sleep, superinduced by baptism and other things, to convey to him the substance of my words. Nearly a thousand years ago, if there be any truth in history, Sigmund the bright-eyed came hither with his men and built this hall, in which we are now to drink the health of another bright-eyed Sigmund. In this very place, perhaps upon this very spot, he feasted and wassailed with his warriors, and drained his horn to the future glories of his name.

His grand old spirit is with us to-night, rejoicing as we rejoice, quaffing the brown Walhalla-brew while we sip the nectar of the Rhine Nixies. For many a long year he has sat gloomy and mournful and full of sadness before his untasted horn, watching with his wonderful eyes the single silken thread that bore all the fate of his race, hoping and not daring to hope, fearing and refusing to fear —he who dared all things and feared nothing.'

Rex paused a moment and his colour changed a little. There was a ring of deepest emotion in his voice when he continued.

'The thread has not been broken,' he said. 'The strain was fearful and the danger greater than can be told. One of the silken strands parted, the other has borne the weight that was meant for both. One of the two beings, in whom ran that good and true blood, was taken—in glory; the other is left—to be, in peace, the mother of many a brave Sigmund yet unborn, the mother, first, of him to whom we have

given to-day the spotless name his fathers bore.'

He paused again and lifted high the great beaker of old Rhine wine.

'She—our dear Hilda, can neither guess nor know the love we bear her,' he said, and suddenly the fire that was so rarely seen flashed in his eyes. 'But she shall know it and feel it, one day, in the love we shall bear her son. Drink, all of you the best health the world holds! Drink to Hilda and to Sigmund the younger, drink to the great spirit of the first Sigmund, and to all his glorious line for ever! Drink to the hope that, as a thousand years ago he drank to Hilda, so we may be draining this health to a son of Hilda's who may sit here a thousand years from to-day! To Hilda! To Sigmund! Hoch, Sigmundskron, Hoch!'

The four voices rang together, even the baroness joining in the cheer. Rex and Greif drained their glasses to the last drop, and each tapped the rim upon his nail; then, with one accord, as though to carry out the ancient custom to its barbaric completeness,

both dashed their beakers against the opposite wall, so that they were shivered into a thousand splinters. It is a strange old manner, and the purpose of it is that a glass honoured by a noble and solemn health, may never be defiled by ordinary use again.

Rex sat down in his place and did not speak for some time. He was overcome by an emotion altogether beyond his own comprehension. Unconsciously, in proposing the health, he had identified himself altogether with the race of which he spoke, and for the first time in his life had lost himself in the excitement of the moment. He tried to recall what he had said, but his heart was beating so fast that he could hardly think. He had not meant to say much, he had assuredly not prepared the little speech, and he had most certainly not expected to be carried away by his own words. Hitherto, when he had been obliged to speak of anything with a certain degree of feeling, out of regard for others, he had been conscious of coldly picking and choosing his expressions to suit the sentiment he was supposed to

entertain. He had thought he could do the same now; he had begun with a trivial jest about student life; he had been enticed into a bit of rhetoric about old Sigmund; he had forgotten himself altogether when he spoke of Hilda; and he had ended in a sort of burst of enthusiasm that would have done credit to a hot-headed boy of twenty. He was altogether unconscious as to whether his hearers had been pleased or not.

The baroness, whose feeling about Sigmundskron almost amounted to a religious fervour, sat quite still for a few seconds, and then dried her eyes cautiously as though she were afraid of being noticed. Hilda looked at Rex, wondering what the real nature of the strange man might be, pleased by what he had said and yet surprised that he should have said so much. Rex met her fixed gaze and turned his head away instantly. Greif took a fresh glass.

'Your health, my dear Rex,' he said. He always called him Rex from old habit.

'Your health, dear cousin Horst!' exclaimed Hilda.

Rex started, and took the beaker nearest to him.

'I drink to Hilda's mother,' he said in an odd voice. He looked towards Frau von Sigmundskron, but in her place there seemed to sit another woman, one so like Hilda's self that no human eye could have detected a point in which the one did not resemble the other. He raised the glass to his lips. It was empty, and his lips met only the air.

'Fill before drinking!' laughed Greif.

Rex's hand trembled, as he set down the goblet. The mistake was rectified in an instant and Rex drank the baroness's health. This time as he looked at her, he saw her white hair and delicate thin face in all their reality. The shadow was gone. He had pledged its emptiness in an empty glass.

That night his light burned late, and the owls, if they had looked, might have seen his shadow pass and repass many hundreds of times behind the curtain of the open window. Hour after hour he paced his lonely room, asking himself the meaning of what was happening in his brain. It seemed

to him that he was suffering from an extraordinary hallucination, which he had indulged until it had taken possession of his whole being. Again and again he went back to the first beginnings of his fancy, recalling the time when he had begun to construct out of nothing a love for himself in the past, imagining for Hilda an imaginary mother, who should have been his own imaginary wife. He cursed the puerility of the thought, and yet returned to it again and again in search of the sweet, sad peace he had so often found in his fancied memories. But that was gone. The scenes he had created grew dull and lost their colour, he forgot the very points which had most pleased him once. And yet he was conscious of acute suffering. It was but a few hours since he had lifted that empty goblet to his lips, and had seen distinctly before him the shadow he loved so well. How was it possible? There was a chair—he had lifted his hand thus—and she had been there. Suddenly his arm was arrested in the very act of the gesture, he grew icy cold, and his

stony eyes set themselves in a horrified stare. A cry of despair burst from his lips.

'Great God in Heaven—I love Hilda!'

That was all, and there was silence in the lonely chamber for many hours.

CHAPTER XXVI

Day had dawned when Rex staggered to his feet, scarcely conscious of where he was, nor of what had happened, knowing only that he had spent many hours in utmost agony. The sight of the familiar objects in the room recalled the whole train of thought which had preceded the shock he had received. Slowly and painfully he began to walk up and down as he had done during the night. It was not possible for his strong nature to remain for any great length of time in a state of stupor, nor was there any danger of his being again affected as he had been at first. After a little while he grew calm and collected, and he realised that something must be done immediately.

He had found the key to all his vain

imaginings, to all his varied moods, to the strange disturbance of his faculties in Hilda's presence. He loved his brother's wife, and he knew it. He sought for a remedy, as though he had been assailed by the plague.

There was a medicine close by, in the drawer of his desk, which would cure love or anything else. He knew that. It would be the affair of a moment, the pulling of a trigger, an explosion he should scarcely hear, and there would be no more Rex. The temptation was strong, and moreover there was a tendency in his nature towards suicide which he knew was inherited. It would be a fitting end to the useless life he had led, the son of such a father and of such a mother. No one would guess why he was dead, and it would be soon done. Then indeed there would be no trace left of the old times before the tragedy of Greifenstein. It would be the last page in the history, as he himself was the last survivor, except Greif, and Greif had a right to be happy.

A right—and why? What had Greif done to deserve Hilda more than Rex? He

was younger, handsomer, and more fortunate. That was the point. Greif's luck had saved him, and what was life to him was death to Rex. It was pure good fortune. There had not been a struggle or the least desire for one. Rex himself had done everything in his power to push on the marriage, and could blame no one for the result. Greif was happy and Rex was broken-hearted. If Greif had refused to marry Hilda, Rex might perhaps have won her, supplying by his own wealth the fortune which should have been hers through Greif's ruin.

Luck indeed! There was Greif, nameless and penniless in reality, but unconscious of the awful misfortunes he had escaped, delivered from the borrowed name that was stained, and invested with one more noble and spotless than the other had ever been, lord of Sigmundskron, husband of Hilda, father of a new race. What more could the heart of man desire? That was what Greif appeared to be, and was, so far as he himself was aware. And this—Rex drew from a secret place his father's last letter—this

was the real Greif whom none knew but Rex.

He read the words carefully many times. Then he leaned back in his chair and gazed long through the open window at the distant forest. At last he rose and lit a candle. It might be best that he should die now, but if so, this secret must die with him. He had only preserved the writing in case Greif refused to marry Hilda, and now they were not only married, but there was an heir born to them. He held the letter in the midst of the flame, and then the envelope till both were consumed to ashes, and the summer breeze that blew into the room wafted the black remains, light as threads of gossamer, from the table to the floor, and away into dark corners to crumble into dust.

No one could ever guess the secret now, thought Rex, not dreaming that by a strange train of circumstances another letter had been stored away beneath the same roof but yesterday in the safe keeping of honest Berbel. Greif was safe, thought Rex, as he laid his hand upon the drawer again, to take the

other thing from its place. He, Rex, would leave no tell-tale letters behind. It should be sharp, short, complete and decisive. There would be some regrets for the lonely man who was gone, and they would never dream how he had purchased their security with his life. He laid the weapon upon the table before him.

Their security? Surely, that was but a theatrical phrase, with no meaning, spoken to make his miserable death seem grand, or at least worthy. Security implied danger, and what danger could his wretched life bring to Hilda or her husband? The thought that Hilda could ever love him was monstrous, the suggestion that he could ever speak loving words to her he loved, since he knew who she was, stung him like a blow on the mouth. That splendid angel could no more stoop from her superb purity, than he, Rex, could have flung a handful of mud in her divine face—no more than he could have entertained for one horrible instant the thought of sullying what God had made so white. He had a bitter scorn of that word

security, so soon as it had flashed unspoken through his mind; he cursed his own soul for the contemptible thought. And in his self-abasement, he was heroic, unconsciously, as heroes are. He was to die, but it was for honour's sake, and not for any foul wrong done to man or woman.

He could say that, with a clear conscience. From the moment when he had felt the truth, and had known that he loved his brother's wife, he had been tortured almost past endurance. Not one sweet thought of Hilda had entered his heart, there was nothing there but the stabbing pain of his own folly, and the searing consciousness that his folly had ended in the most appalling of all truths. There was nothing in his mind but a relentless hatred of himself, a stunning and sudden comprehension of what he had allowed himself to dream. Even if there had been no other reason, he deserved to die, he judged himself worthy of death. It was for honour's sake—how could he live and face them all, knowing what he was, even if they did not know?

There must be an end, and there could be but one end to his sufferings. He put out his hand and drew the weapon into his grasp.

What was honour, that he should die for it? He had believed in very little beyond himself during forty years, but he believed in honour and had been reckoned a most honourable man among those who had known him. He had risked his life for it many a time, but now, for its sake, he was to take his own life without risk, deliberately, as he would have shot a wild beast, as he would have crushed a poisonous reptile under his heel. What was this thing? Was it a fact, a shadow, an idea, a breath, a god or a devil? What was it, for which such deeds had been done, for which old Greifenstein and Rieseneck had slain his mother and laid down their lives in such stern haste? A man might well ask what he was to die for, thought Rex. Why did it seem base in him to live, even though every moment of his existence were to be spent in rooting out what he so hated, in burning

out what had defiled his soul; and why did it seem noble and brave to die? To die was easy as drawing a breath, to live was a hard and fearful thing. Yet honour said, Die and be satisfied that you are doing right. Did honour always command what was easiest for a man to do? Again, what was it? He had but a few moments left to live, and in a lifetime he had served honour scrupulously. What if it were but a myth, but a legend of fools, a destroying idol worshipped by brave and brainless visionaries, who had more courage than intelligence, more desire to do right than discernment to sift right from wrong? Pity that so many daring, honest men should have been spitted on rapiers, cloven with sabres, riddled with bullet-holes, for the sake of a vain breath, emptier than the glass he had raised to his lips last night! And yet—he might search, and deny, and argue, and scoff—honour remained a fact. No, not a fact, a law. A law having rules, and conditions and penalties and rewards all defined in the human heart, all equally beyond the range

of the human intelligence. His brain could not imagine a question in which honour was concerned, to which his heart did not give the right answer instantaneously, quicker than the brain itself could have solved the problem. And what the heart told him was right, indubitably and indisputably right. Then he was to die for something he felt but could not understand, for the decision of some power within him, wiser and swifter and surer than the cool head to which he had trusted so long. To call that power the heart was nonsense, as absurd as to call it a function of the brain. It was distinct from both, it had a being of its own, independent, dominating, tremendous in its effects. In danger the head said, stop; the heart said, go on. And honour, then, was the spontaneous reasoning of this superior power, whatever it might be. But, if it reasoned so unfailingly and so surely about some things, why had it nothing to say about others? Why could this faultless judge decide of nothing save right and wrong? From habit, doubtless, because we

refer no other questions to him. No, for when we ask a question of ourselves, or when one is asked of us by another, we do not always know beforehand which part of ourselves will answer. Mystery of mysteries, to be solved only by assuming that man has an immortal soul. Idle waste of time, thought Rex, looking at the cartridge in his revolver and then slowly setting back the hammer. An idle waste of time, to think of such matters. Honour or no honour, heart or no heart, the mysterious power within him bade him die. Die, then, and be done with it. He held the weapon in his hand, ready to do the deed. One second, and all would be over. At one end of that polished dark blue barrel was life, with all its dishonour, with all its sufferings, with all the monstrous blackness of evil it held, the life of an honest man who loved his brother's wife in spite of himself, and loathed the thought. At the other end was death, swift, sharp, sure, the answer to all questions, the solution of all ills, the medicine for all earthly woe. Rex

laid the revolver down, and drew back a little from the table.

Was it possible that he was killing himself merely to escape suffering, to rid himself of pain, to desist from a contest too bitter for his endurance? If that were it, Rex was a miserable coward, and not the honourable man he had thought himself. With the instinct that prompts many men to do the same at such moments, he rose from his chair and went to the mirror. He started when he saw himself in it. It was as though the marvellous look of youth that had clung to him so long, had fallen from his face, and left an old man's features behind. His skin was livid, his eyes were sunken, the flesh was drawn and white about his nostrils and brows and temples. His hair and beard, matted with cold sweat, hung in wild disorder about his head and face. It was strange that the bright summer's morning should even seem to change their colour—or was it a defect in the glass? He looked nearer, and he scarcely dared to believe his eyes. There were grey hairs, whole locks

of grey, in the soft brown masses. He had heard of such quick changes but had never believed them real. He gazed in silence at the reflexion of himself for some minutes.

'I am an old man,' he said softly, and turned away, forgetting what he had come to see—whether he were a coward or not.

He went back to the table and sat down, supporting his head in his two hands. He realised what he had suffered, and the question returned to his agonised brain. Was he killing himself to escape torture, or out of his love of honour? He wondered bitterly whether any pain could be worse in the future than what he had borne during this night, and during the hours since the dawn had broken in upon him. It seemed impossible. Then on a sudden, the bright image of Hilda burst upon his sight as he pressed his closed lids with the palms of his hands. Hilda was there before him in all her splendour, he could see every line of her face, every shade of its glorious colouring, every twist of her yellow hair. The light streamed upon him from the whole

vision, and he was looking into the bright depths of her eyes. It was exquisite delight, and yet he felt overwhelmed with shame that he should dare to look and love. It was like him to fight to the utmost. With a supreme effort he opened his eyes, and suffered himself to be dazzled by the violent daylight. The vision was gone, but he understood what he must bear, without a sign of pain, if he were to look upon the reality. And yet he knew his own strength. Face to face with Hilda he could have forced his stony eyes to dulness and his features to an indifferent calm. He could do that and not fail. The clear memory of her he had received in that moment told him how much he was able to resist, but showed him also what that resistance would cost; above all it had exhibited to him in all beauty and clearness of detail that upon which he was never to look again. The pain had been sharp and quick, and was scarcely distinguished from the momentary, involuntary happiness. But he could bear it, and worse. It was not to escape it that he had

determined to end his life. Nor would he do the fatal deed if he were sure that he were impelled to it merely in the hope of escaping a little suffering, or much. Whatever his faults might be, he was brave still; braver now, perhaps, than he had ever been. There had been a time when all human action, or inaction, had seemed to him so indifferent in itself and in its consequences, that he had almost scoffed at the idea of contrasting courage with cowardice. But he had not then been put to the test as he was now.

It was not the fear of what he must bear that drove him from existence. He was sure of that. He resolutely set himself to think of what life would be in the future, if he chose it, and if he stayed where he was. It was clear that he could live, if he pleased, and meet Hilda, and Greif, and Hilda's mother, and keep a calm face and a steady voice when he was with them. If it were a question of courage, that would be the least courageous course. It would be easier to suffer anything than to put himself beyond

the possibility of ever seeing Hilda again. He owned, in bitter self-contempt, that this was absolutely true. The sting of death was there, in the choice of total extinction, in the act of leaving all that he loved, as well as in the extermination of that self which held the power to love. But for one thought, life would still be sweet. All the torment of an existence made dreadful by the hopelessness of an unquenchable passion would be nothing, as compared with the hourly joy of seeing Hilda and of hearing her voice. That would compensate for all things, no matter how horrible, except one; but that one outweighed the rest. The certainty that his whole life hereafter must be one long act of treachery to Greif must overbalance everything else.

That was the point of honour he had sought to explain. He thought he had been mistaken, and that his self-hatred and self-contempt had really but little to do with his decision. It was neither for his own sake nor for Hilda's that he must leave the world so suddenly, but for Greif's.

Greif was his trusted friend, Greif was his cousin, Greif was his brother. To feel what he felt for that brother's wife was treachery, no matter how he should hide his feelings or fight against them. The time would assuredly come when he must hate this man, as he now loved him, and his jealousy would take some active shape, and do Greif some real injury. At any cost, such a catastrophe must be warded off. To leave the two in their happiness and to go away, plunging again into the old existence he hated, would be of no avail. Rex knew human nature well, and was wise enough to include himself in what he knew. He was sure that, sooner or later, his resolution to keep away from Sigmundskron would break down, as much through the insistence of Greif and Hilda, as on account of his own inclinations. Here, too, the humanity of the man showed itself, as well as the weakest points in his self-knowledge and reasoning. Rex might and could have left Sigmundskron then, and his courage would assuredly have kept him away longer than he suspected,

even long enough, perhaps, to cool the heat of his passion and make his return both possible and safe. Had he been called upon to decide the case for another he would in all probability have advised such a course, for he would then have taken into consideration the value of life as a factor in the question. But, for his own part, he held his existence as of little worth, and it would not have needed half of what he now suffered to prompt him to part with it. At any time during the last ten years, a severe shock to his feelings, or a fit of unconquerable melancholy, would have been enough to suggest to him the advisability of making a precipitate exit from the stage on which he found himself. Death had long possessed attractions for him, and it was long since life had offered him anything for the enjoyment of which he would have taken the trouble to undergo any annoyance whatsoever. Life seemed to him such a very trivial matter that he felt no hesitation in abandoning it, and he only put off the doing so for a few minutes now, out of

curiosity to understand more fully the motives of his action.

It was so very simple to pull the trigger of a pistol, and so very complicated to begin a new existence, just when he had believed that his wanderings were over. The future was inexpressibly dismal, lonely and painful, and death was such a natural and easy escape from it. These reflexions were assuredly present, unknown to himself, in the midst of the many thoughts that crowded his brain in that supreme hour, and they must have influenced him in forming his ultimate decision, though he did not guess that they were at work. He saw only the alternative possibilities of an ignoble life or of an honourable death, and he chose the more pleasant, the easier, the quicker. In the twinkling of an eye it would be done, and here would be no more Rex. Those left behind would think kindly of him; they would suppose he had been mad, and in due time they would congratulate themselves that he had not lived to be a burthen to them.

Rex had not any great belief in human sympathy, nor in the regret people felt for the dead. The fact that he could not place credence in the existence of a future life could be traced to his indifference about the present, and in its turn made him sceptical concerning the beliefs of others. Protestations of friendship or affection could mean but little to a man who had scarcely ever expressed either, except from a desire not to seem brutal or unfeeling. It was true that he was profoundly attached to Greif, but his instinct told him that his attachment was only half reciprocated. He loved Hilda in a way of his own, as men have seldom loved, but he knew that Hilda's thoughts of him did not go farther than a vague half-friendly, half-cousinly regard. It was not likely that he should expect of either a passionate grief over his end, or any exaggerated mourning for his death. The idea that the fact of the suicide, independently of his own personality, would add a deeper shadow to the memories of Greifenstein troubled him very little. He had

seen how Greif had forgotten the horror of the tragedy in his love of Hilda, and since Hilda would still be at hand, she would help him to forget this also. With the coolness of a man of his age, he calculated the extent of Greif's possible distress and reckoned it insignificant. With the generosity of his exceptional nature, he admitted that his fondness for his brother did not depend upon any principle of reciprocity. If he had chosen, eighteen months earlier, to remain alive instead of following the example of his unhappy father, it had been for Greif's sake that he had lived, though Greif had never known it; if now, knowing the thing that was in his heart, he chose to die, it was for Greif's sake still.

He was glad that he was not doing such a deed merely to escape suffering himself. The thought would have stayed his hand, preserving him to undergo the most terrible ordeal he could imagine; whereas, in its absence he could spare himself that, at least, without a pang, while ridding Greif of the presence of a traitor.

The word was too strong, but Rex could not see that it was so. It seemed to him that by all the wild indulgence of his imagination he had fostered that growth of which he had so suddenly been made aware. He could no longer separate the intention from the fact, and he believed himself guilty of both alike, though he was in reality but the victim of circumstances and the sport of a cruel destiny. Everything combined to bring about the unavoidable result, the fatal tendency to suicide that existed in his blood, the excessive emotion of a heart unused to feel, the despair of an absolutely hopeless love, the horror of a self that seemed all at once blackened by the most hideous treachery, even the constitutional fearlessness of a man to whom the moment of death offered no terrors; everything was present which could drive Rex over the brink, and everything was absent which might have held him back.

He rose once more from his chair and made a few steps in the room, with downcast eyes and folded arms. Methodical and

rational to the end, he collected his thoughts for the last time and reviewed the result of his melancholy reflexions, forcing himself to state the facts with the utmost plainness and conciseness, as though he were summing up the case before the jury of his faculties, upon whom depended the final verdict. Too wise to die in vain, too brave to die for a selfish motive, too noble to be influenced by any fear of death itself, he was determined that the deed should be done calmly, in the fullest consciousness of its importance to himself and others, to the fullest satisfaction of his own enlightened reasoning.

That his present condition was wholly intolerable, he refused to believe, for he would not admit that there could be anything too hard for him to endure if his own inclinations were alone considered. It was possible that his strength might break down if he were exposed to such an ordeal as life with Hilda and his brother during many years; but he should certainly be aware, in such a case, of the failing of his powers, and

he would be able to keep his own secret until the end, or, if not, to do a year hence what he meant to do now. He was far too old, and far too wise, to take his life from romantic and scarcely defined motives, seeking nothing but relief from a half hysteric pain, asking of death nothing but the forgetfulness of life and love.

One watching him might have seen as much, from his face and manner. Being about to die, he looked more like a strong man humiliated by the shame of his own deeds than like a boy in a fit of despair. The look of compact strength that belonged to him was not gone, and his step was firm and even. His face was haggard, pale and drawn, but its expression was calm and determined, full of the dignity of a man superior to all hasty impulses, and very far removed from the influence of all base motives. And his outward appearance represented very truly the moral position he had taken and held with such tenacity. A wise man might have differed from him, but could not have despised him ; a reli-

gious person would have been sorry for him, but could not have condemned his profound determination to do what was just according to his light, in perfect sacrifice of himself, to the atonement for an involuntary wrong; a weak man would have envied his strength, a strong man might well have admired his calm power of reasoning in the face of death, and a man of heart would have felt for him.

He stood still before the table and looked out through the open window into the bright summer air. Presently he spoke to himself in a low, distinct voice.

'It is best,' he said decisively. 'I, Horst von Rieseneck, stand here to die, because I love my brother's wife. I die of my own free will. I die because I will not live and feel such a thing in my heart, because I will not be dishonoured in my own estimation. I obey no man, I fear no man, I am influenced by no man. It is my own decision, and I have a right to it. It is my own life, and I have a right to take it. It is my own love, and I have a right to kill it. I do not

die to escape suffering, but the inward conviction of dishonour, which no honest man is called upon to bear. I die in the full possession of all my senses and faculties, and if any of them were disturbed I would wait, in order to judge more calmly. That is all I have to say, I believe.'

It was the last satisfaction Rex could give himself in the world he was about to leave. His intelligence demanded of him that his end should be calm, determined and yet unprejudiced, and that to the very last he should remain open to the conviction of error should any sufficient reason or reasons occur to him within a reasonable time. But no reason why he should hold his hand presented itself, and he was aware that he had reached the supreme moment. He was glad that he had not done in haste what he was now going to do upon mature consideration, for he had always loved to be justified in his actions. But since the result of so much thought had only strengthened his first intention, there was no object in delaying the end any longer.

Having made up his mind definitely, he crossed the room and unlocked the door, reflecting that, since he was to be found dead in a few minutes, there was no use in making a mystery of the fact nor in obliging people to break the door. Keen, cool and practical to the end, the action was characteristic of him. He came back to the table a last time and took the revolver in his hand. He examined the lock, raised the weapon steadily and planted the cold muzzle firmly against his temple. Then he turned his eyes towards the open window and pulled the trigger.

The hammer fell with an inoffensive snap, and Rex frowned. But he had not the slightest intention of relinquishing his purpose. With incredible coolness, he went to a corner of the room and took a box of perfectly fresh cartridges from the drawer where he kept his ammunition; after carefully removing the charges from the revolver, he reloaded the chambers, one by one, raised the hammer and resumed his position. Some moments elapsed before he

again lifted the weapon to his head. The incident had shaken his nerves, and he was determined to die in full consciousness and appreciation of his act.

'I wish I could flatter myself that it is for Hilda's sake,' he thought. 'But as I cannot, let this be the end.'

The castle clock began to toll the hour of noon, as he raised the revolver a second time.

CHAPTER XXVII

When Berbel had hidden the precious letter among her possessions, she had firmly intended to keep it for some time, before giving it to its owner, but she had not excluded from her calculations the possibility of consulting Hilda upon the matter. In the hurry and confusion of the christening day it had seemed to the good woman that she might wait an indefinite time, leaving Greif in ignorance of the writing, while he grew daily better able to bear such a sudden and vivid quickening of past horrors, as must be brought about in his mind when he should read his father's message. It appeared to Berbel both wiser and kinder to hide the letter for a long time.

The day had passed off to the satisfaction

of every one, and Berbel certainly deserved a share in the success of the christening. She had been indefatigable, wise and provident in all things, just as she had been in the old times when a penny meant more than a gold piece now. She had superintended everything and everybody, from the baby Sigmund to Greif himself, from the christening cake to the potato dumplings of the labourers' feast. Nothing had escaped her quick eyes, or her ready memory, and all had gone well to the end.

But when all was over Berbel was tired, and she was fain to acknowledge that she was not the woman she had been twenty years before. She was tired with the long day's work and slept, instead of meditating upon the letter, as she meant to do. Moreover sleep brought a wiser judgment to her refreshed brain, and when she awoke in the morning she resolved to consult Hilda without delay. Once more she opened her treasure safe and took out the sealed envelope, and looked at it attentively; not that she meant to run the risk of carrying

it about with her, but because she wished to fix its appearance in her mind, in order to describe it to Hilda. There was nothing remarkable about the outward look of the letter except, perhaps, the superscription, in which Wastei had detected something of old Greifenstein's roughness. But Berbel thought it quite natural that he should have addressed it simply, 'To my son Greif,' as he had done. To her mind it was more affectionate, and looked better than if he had written 'Seiner Hochwohlgeboren Herrn Greif von Greifenstein.' She looked closely at the thing, turning it over and examining it with the utmost attention. But there was nothing worth noticing beyond what she saw at first. The writing was large, heavy and clear, and the envelope was sealed with wax bearing the impress of the Greifenstein arms. There could not be more than one sheet of paper inside, for the letter was very thin. Berbel was somewhat surprised to find it in such good condition, considering that it had lain between the linings of a coat for more than

a year and a half, but she reflected that during that time it had been carefully preserved, most probably in a chest or drawer in the recesses of the Jew's shop, and that, after all, there was no particular reason why it should be torn, or stained, or otherwise injured, as though it had been handed about from one person to another ever since it had been written. The pristine freshness of the paper was certainly a little tarnished, and there were a few insignificant creases on its smooth surface; but, on the whole, the letter looked as though it might have been written but a few weeks before it had fallen into Berbel's hands. It struck the good woman that Hilda would certainly wish to hear the whole story of Wastei's discovery, which was strange enough, indeed; and that when she had heard it, that would not be all, for if they decided to give Greif the letter at once, he also must know whence it came.

For a moment Berbel conceived it possible that it might not, after all, contain a farewell communication, since there was nothing

to show that it had really been written on the fatal night, but the idea would not bear examination, and when she laid the envelope once more in its place in her box she was firmly persuaded that it contained old Greifenstein's last words to his son. The longer she thought of this, the more she wondered how on the previous day she could have meditated keeping it from Greif for any length of time. Her motive had assuredly been to save him pain if possible, but at present she saw the whole matter in a different light. At the most, she thought, he might be saddened for a day or two by this message from another world, but it was better that he should suffer a little at present than that he should continue to fancy that his father had forgotten him in his last moments. Berbel was by no means without her share of the national military instinct, which will face annoyance in any shape, or impose it upon others rather than allow a duty of any kind to be eluded, or the execution of its mandates postponed. Better for Greif, she thought, that the

matter should be settled at once, better for herself, better for everybody. Delay might be fatal. She herself might die suddenly, and the letter would be found among her belongings. What would be thought of her by her beloved mistress if it were discovered that she had concealed so precious a document? Or Greif might die, without ever knowing that his father had written—a hundred misfortunes might occur to prevent the letter reaching the hands for which it was destined. There was no time like the present, thought the sturdy Berbel, and no day like to-day for doing unpleasant things which could not be avoided.

It was necessary to find an opportunity of speaking with Hilda alone, without danger of interruption, and as soon as possible. It was yet early morning, and Hilda was in all probability still asleep, dreaming of the festivities of the previous day, but it would be important to know whether Greif was up or not, and whether he intended to leave the castle during the morning. Berbel left her room and went down to the court. The

men were sure to know if Greif had meant to go into the forest or to stay at home, as he would certainly have given orders for some one to accompany him. He was not like his father, who had loved to tramp all day alone, wearying himself out, and coming home late in the evening, in the perpetual attempt to make the days seem short. Greif was by nature gregarious, and was not satisfied with the society of his dogs, but usually took a couple of men with him, when he could not prevail upon Rex to join in his expeditions.

Berbel went into the court and asked a few questions, carelessly enough. It was a warm morning and the men seemed sleepy after the carousal of the previous night. None of them had received any orders for the day, and those who had anything to do went about their occupations in a leisurely fashion, slowly and deliberately, while those who had no work sat together in a shady corner smoking their porcelain pipes, and discussing the festive reminiscences of the christening, enjoying their idleness as very

strong men can, who habitually work hard and say little. It was evident that nothing would be done on that day, and it was probable that Greif would stay at home. Berbel turned away and went towards the entrance of the hall. She was about to go in when she heard footsteps behind her, and on looking round saw Wastei striding up with his long, greyhound step.

'God greet you, Frau Berbel,' he said, coming nearer.

He was no longer arrayed in his magnificent velvet coat as on the previous day. Such finery was only for the greatest festivities, and at present he wore no jacket at all, but a rough waistcoat with metal buttons, which hung loose and open over his shirt, and he had a bundle under his arm.

'Good morning, Wastei,' answered Berbel, fixing her sharp eyes upon him with a look of inquiry. She wondered why he had come.

'I have brought you something,' he remarked, standing still before her, and tapping the bundle he carried with one hand.

'More trout?' inquired Berbel with a twitching smile. 'There is no gold to be picked up to-day, Master Wastei.'

'Unfortunately,' he answered. 'But then one can never know,' he added reflectively.

'Out with it!' exclaimed Berbel who was not in a humour for long conversations.

'Out with it is soon said,' returned the other. 'It is a serious matter. Do you think I can chatter like a magpie without thinking of what I am to say?'

'Then think, and be quick about it, or I shall go in.'

'Oh, if you are in a hurry, you may take the bundle without any explanation,' replied Wastei, holding it out towards her. Berbel took it, and felt it, as though trying to guess what it contained.

'What is it?' she asked at length, as her imagination failed to suggest the nature of the contents.

'It is my coat,' said Wastei. 'The old wolf's coat, if you like it better.'

'And what am I to do with your coat?' inquired Berbel. In spite of the question

she had thrust the bundle under one arm and held it firmly, with the evident intention of keeping it.

'When you have given the letter to the baron, you might be so kind as to mend the pocket for me,' said Wastei calmly.

'But I told you I should perhaps wait some time before giving the letter.'

'Yes—but you have thought about that in the night,' answered Wastei keenly. 'You will not wait much longer than to-day.'

'What makes you think that?'

'It would not be like you, Frau Berbel,' said the man, with affected indifference.

'Perhaps not,' replied Berbel, smiling unconsciously at the subtle flattery bestowed upon her scrupulously honest character. 'Perhaps not. I had thought of it, as you say.'

'And I had thought that unless the old wolf's coat were there with the hole in the pocket, Frau Berbel might not be able to make it quite clear that Master Wastei had spoken the truth. But if the truth is quite

clear, why then——' he paused, as though he did not care what might happen in such a case.

Berbel looked at him for a moment, and then laughed a little, a phenomenon which with her was exceedingly unusual.

'You are really not stupid at all,' she remarked. The ghost of a smile played about Wastei's thin lips as he turned his eyes upon her. Their expression was at once keen, cunning and good-natured.

'Nobody ever said I was particularly dull,' he answered.

'Then you want me to show the coat, together with the letter?'

'Of course.'

'But when they know that it belonged to Herr von Greifenstein, they will wish to keep it, will they not?'

'Of course,' repeated Wastei.

'And then, when they find that you have bought it honestly, they will want to buy it of you.'

'Of course.'

'And you gave twenty marks for it?'

'Twenty marks.'

'And you think they will give you more for it, though I shall tell them just what it cost you at the Jew's?'

'Of course.'

'You are not stupid, Wastei. You are not stupid at all. But I thought you imagined the coat would bring you luck. I wonder that you want to part with it!'

'Do you? Is it not luck if I get more for it than it cost at the Jew's?' The man's eyes twinkled as he spoke.

'There is certainly something in what you say,' answered Berbel. 'I am not surprised that you got it so cheap. You understand a bargain, I see.'

'And you will be glad, too, Frau Berbel, when you have to explain how the letter was found,' said Wastei thoughtfully. 'You will be glad to have the coat in your hands to show, and if they like, they can go to the Jew and he will tell them that I bought it only the other day.'

'You are quite sure you are telling the truth, Wastei?'

'I always do, now that I have a gun licence,' he answered. 'You see, the truth is best for people who have anything to lose.'

'Fie, Wastei!' exclaimed Berbel, half inclined to smile at his odd philosophy, but unwilling to let him see that she could appreciate a jest upon so moral a subject.

'It is true, Frau Berbel. Not that I ever lied much, either, though I have told some smart tales to the foresters in the old days, when I was a free-shot in the forest, and they were always trying to catch me with a hare in my pocket—and to you too, Frau Berbel, when I used to make you think the game was all right. What did it matter, so long as you had it to eat, you and—well, those were queer times. I suppose you have game whenever you like, now, do you not?'

'Ay, Wastei—I sometimes could not find any lead in your hares——'

'That made them lighter to carry and more wholesome to eat,' observed the other with a chuckle.

'And I had my doubts about them, of course——'

'But you did not ask many questions—not very many—did you?'

'Not always, Wastei,' answered Berbel with a twitch of the lips. 'You see I thought it best to believe you, and to treat you like an honest fellow. There were reasons——'

'Better than doubts, especially when the hare was dead and lying on your kitchen table. Well, well, those times are gone now, and if I ever shot a hare or a roebuck without lead, or pulled the trout out of the stream without making a hole in his nose, why I have forgotten it, and I will not do it again, I promise you. I am growing old, Frau Berbel, I am growing old.'

'And wise, I hope——'

'When a man is young he can do without a gun licence,' observed Wastei. 'When the years begin to come, he wants that and other things too. May-wine in May, Frau Berbel, and brown beer in October.'

'And all the cherry spirits you can pick

up, between times, I suppose. What are the other things?'

'A good house to live in, and a good wife to roll the potato dumplings. These are two things that are good when the grey years come.'

'You put the house before the wife, I see,' remarked Berbel.

'Because if I had a good house I could have the good wife fast enough. Wastei is not so dull as he looks. He has looked about him in the world. Ay, Frau Berbel, now if you were thinking of being married and had your choice of two men, would you choose the one with a house or the one without? It is a simple question.'

'Very simple, Master Wastei,' answered Berbel, stiffening her stiff neck a little. 'So simple that it is of no use to think about it, nor even to ask it. When do you want your coat back?'

'I want a coat, but not that one—whenever you please. But do not hurry yourself, for I shall not catch cold, and my sweetheart does not care whether I have one or not.'

'So you have a sweetheart, have you?'

'Ay, and a treasure, too—in my waistcoat pocket,' explained Wastei, showing the shining edge of the gold piece he had received on the previous day. 'She has yellow hair, like the lady Hilda's, and a golden heart like Frau Berbel's—I only wish she were as big.'

'Fie, Wastei—making compliments at this time of day, and to an old woman!'

'Old friends, old logs, old spirits,' observed Wastei. 'We have known each other a long time, Frau Berbel, in good and bad days, summer and winter, and you have always been the same to me.'

'Small credit for that!' exclaimed Berbel. 'You have done me many a good turn in twenty years, and my ladies too, and you have never got much by it, that I can see—more praise to you!'

'Nonsense!' ejaculated Wastei, who was visibly affected by the speech. 'God greet you, Frau Berbel!' he added, turning away abruptly and leaving her standing alone in the court.

Berbel looked after him for a few seconds, and there was an unusually tender expression in her sharp eyes, as she watched his retreating figure. He had been a wild fellow in his day, a daring poacher, an intrepid drinker of fiery cherry spirits, always the first in a fight and the last out of it, the terror of the head forester and his men, the object of old Greifenstein's inveterate hatred, the admiration of the village maidens for twenty miles around, the central figure in a hundred adventures and hairbreadth escapes of all kinds, and yet, as though he were miraculously preserved from harm, he had always managed to keep out of trouble, and though many a time suspected of making free with the game, yet never convicted, nor even brought to a trial. It had been impossible to catch him and impossible to prove anything against him. At last the head forester, who had a secret reverence for his extraordinary powers of endurance and unrivalled skill in woodcraft, had made terms with him and employed him as a sort of supernumerary upon the government

establishment. From that day, Wastei, who would have waged war to the death with all regular foresters, had surrendered at discretion to the kindness shown him, and had given up poaching for ever. Berbel could not help liking him, and being grateful to him for many a good turn he had done the poor ladies at Sigmundskron. She had often distrusted him at first, but after twenty years' acquaintance and friendship she owned, as she watched him stride away, that he had a heart of gold, as he had said of her but a few moments earlier.

It seemed as though circumstances pointed clearly to the course she had intended to pursue, for since Wastei had brought her the coat it was no longer possible to put off the execution of her purpose. She determined to obtain an interview with Hilda as soon as possible and to place both the garment and the letter in her hands. The reasoning she followed in selecting Hilda for her confidence has been sufficiently explained already. The intimacy existing between the two made such a plan seem

most natural to her, Hilda's strong and sensible nature made it safe, the difficulty of the mission, so far as Greif was concerned, made it appear wisest to leave the matter to his wife's wisdom and tact. Berbel went upstairs with her bundle under her arm.

Though Hilda had not risen quite so early as her old servant, she was by this time dressed and ready for the morning walk Greif liked so much in the summer time. Berbel met them both in one of the passages, walking quickly, arm in arm, talking and laughing happily as they went. Berbel would have let them pass, seeing that Hilda was not alone, had not the latter stopped and asked a question.

'What have you got there, Berbel?' she inquired, looking at the bundle.

'It is a very important matter,' answered Berbel. 'And if you could spare me a few minutes——'

'Is it really important?' asked Hilda, leaning on her husband's arm.

'Very. And if you could spare the time ——' Berbel looked at Greif.

'Very well,' said the latter. 'I have plenty to do, dear. Finish your business with Berbel and meet me on the tower—there is a man waiting for me, I believe.'

Thereupon Greif went on his way down the broad corridor, leaving Hilda and Berbel to their own devices.

'What is it?' asked Hilda, who wanted to lose no time in rejoining her husband.

'It is a very serious affair, and concerns the baron,' answered Berbel. 'Perhaps it would be better if you would come to my room.'

Hilda followed her, wondering what could have happened, and not without some presentiment of evil. When they had reached their destination Berbel carefully bolted the door and turned to her mistress. It was a small bright room, vaulted and whitewashed, simply but comfortably furnished. Hilda sat down and looked up at Berbel's face, somewhat anxiously.

'It is nothing bad,' said Berbel. 'But it will give pain to the baron, and so I consulted you. I have found a letter written

to him by Herr von Greifenstein on the night he died. No one but you can give it to him.'

Hilda started slightly. Anything which recalled the fearful tragedy was necessarily painful and disturbing to the peace of her unclouded happiness.

'A letter?' she repeated in a low voice. 'Where did you find it? They searched everywhere for months. Are you quite sure?'

'They might have searched for ever, but for the merest accident,' answered Berbel, beginning to undo her bundle. 'This,' she added, unfolding the velvet garment—'this is the coat Herr von Greifenstein wore when he shot himself.'

Hilda gazed silently at the thing during several seconds, and shuddered at the thoughts it recalled, though she was by no means persuaded that Berbel was not mistaken.

'How do you know it is?' she asked at last.

'It was stolen on that night, by one of those city servants who were always at

Greifenstein. Your mother did not notice it. The man took it to a Jew, who kept it a year and then hung it up for sale. A few days ago Wastei bought it to wear at the christening.'

'But how did he know?'

'He guessed it, and found these marks.'

Berbel showed the collar of the coat to Hilda, putting her finger on each spot in succession.

'It looks like rust,' said Hilda.

'It is the blood of Herr von Greifenstein,' answered Berbel solemnly. 'The ball went in just below the right ear, as I have heard your mother say more than once.'

'How horrible!' exclaimed Hilda, drawing back, though her eyes remained riveted on the rusty marks.

'It is not gay,' said Berbel grimly. 'Now look here. Do you see the pocket? Yes. Well, do you see that the lining is torn just above it? Good. Herr von Greifenstein wrote his letter and slipped it into his pocket, because he was thinking of other things at that moment, and paid no atten-

tion to what he did, which was natural enough, poor gentleman. But instead of putting it into the pocket, he happened to slip it through the slit, so that it fell down between the coat and the lining. Do you see?'

'Yes—and then?'

'And then he pulled the trigger of his pistol and died. The letter was hidden in the coat, the coat was stolen, taken to the Jew's and sold to Wastei eighteen months later, with the letter still in it. And Wastei brought me the letter yesterday, and the coat to-day. That is the whole history.'

'Where is it—the letter?' asked Hilda in an anxious tone.

Berbel unlocked her little deal chest and withdrew the precious document, which she put into Hilda's hand. Hilda turned it over and over, and looked from it to the coat, and back again to the sealed envelope, reading the address again and again.

'It is a strange story,' she said at last. 'But I do not see that there can be any

doubt. O Berbel, Berbel! What do you think there is written inside this little bit of paper?'

'A few words to say good-bye to his son, I suppose,' the woman answered.

'If it were only that——' Hilda did not finish the sentence, but her face grew slowly pale and she stared vacantly out of the window, while the hand that held the letter rested on her knee.

'I do not see that it can be anything else,' said Berbel quietly. 'It cannot be a will, for they found everything about the property. What could the poor gentleman say except "Good-bye," and "God bless you"? It seems very simple to me. Of course I knew that it would make the baron very sad to read it, and so I came to you, because I knew you could find just the right moment to give it to him, and just the right words to say, and it seemed wrong in me to keep it even a day. At first, I thought I ought to put it away and wait a year or two, until he had quite forgotten the first shock—but then——'

'Thank heaven you did not!' exclaimed Hilda.

'Well, I am glad I have pleased you,' observed Berbel in her sharp, good-natured way.

'Pleased? Oh, anything would have pleased me better than this thing! It is dreadful, after all this time has passed——'

'But, after all,' suggested Berbel, 'it is only the affair of a day or two, and the baron will be very glad, afterwards, to feel that his father had not forgotten him.'

'You do not understand,' answered Hilda with increasing anxiety. 'We never knew why they killed themselves—it is an awful secret, and the explanation is in this letter.'

'You never knew!' cried Berbel in great astonishment. It had not entered her comprehension that the real facts could be unknown, though they had never been communicated to herself.

'No—neither I nor my husband, and I had hoped that as all has turned out happily we might never know. It would have been far better, far better!'

'Yes, far better,' echoed Berbel, whose simple calculations had been upset by the news, and who began to wish that the coat had fallen into other hands.

Hilda sat quite still, thinking what she should do. The situation was painful from its very simplicity, for it was assuredly her duty to go to her husband and give him the letter, telling him the whole truth at once. He had a right to receive the message from his dead father without a moment's delay, and she knew it, though she hesitated at the thought of what might follow. Her beautiful young face was pale with anxiety, and her bright eyes were veiled by sad thoughts. Poor Berbel was terribly distressed at the result of her discovery and tried to imagine some means of improving the situation.

'If you would let me,' she said, at last, 'I would take the letter to the baron and explain—if it would hurt you——'

'You? I?' cried Hilda almost fiercely. 'It is of him I am thinking, and of what he will suffer. What does it matter for me?

It is my duty, and I must do it—am I his wife only when the sun shines and we are happy? Ah, Berbel, you should know better than that!'

'I only wanted to spare you,' said Berbel humbly.

Hilda looked up quickly and then took the old servant's hand kindly in hers.

'I know,' she said softly. 'But you must think first of him, always—if you love me. Berbel—are you perfectly sure that all this is true and real, that no wicked person is trying to do us some harm?'

'I am as sure as I can be—Wastei said I might ask the Jew, if I pleased.'

'It is true—it is Wastei. Unless he is mistaken himself there can be no doubt, then. But it is all so strange!'

It was stranger still, perhaps, that Wastei's name should be enough to dispel in Hilda's mind all doubts as to the truth of the story, and yet she would have believed the wild, kind-hearted free-shot sooner than many a respectable member of society.

'Put away the coat, Berbel,' she said

after a pause. 'He will not need to see it when he has read the letter, and it would hurt him, as it hurts me.'

'Shall I give it back to Wastei?' inquired Berbel, folding it up.

'No, oh no! Put it away carefully where it will be safe, but where no one will ever see it again.'

'Wastei gave twenty marks for it,' observed Berbel. 'It is not fair that he should lose his money.' She could not help speaking a good word for her old friend.

'Give him forty to buy a new one. He has been honest, very honest.' Hilda sighed, thinking, perhaps, of all the pain that might have been spared, if Wastei had put the letter into the fire, instead of giving it to Berbel.

The good woman carefully folded the coat and hid it away in the recesses of a huge press that filled the end of the room. Then she rolled up the coloured handkerchief and put it into her pocket.

'It is Wastei's,' she said, as her mistress watched her.

The disappearance of the coat recalled to Hilda the duty of acting immediately, and she rose from her seat with a heavy heart. As she was about to leave the room a thought crossed her mind, and she stopped.

'Berbel,' she said, 'my mother must never know that this has been found, or at least, you must never speak of it to her or to any one, and you must tell Wastei to hold his tongue. She has had sorrow enough in her life, and we need not add any more, now that she is so happy.'

'Good,' answered Berbel. 'I will not talk about it, and as for Wastei, I would trust him with anything.'

Hilda slipped the fatal letter into the bosom of her frock and went in search of her husband.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Greif had not found the man who was supposed to be waiting for him, and he himself had sat down to wait for Hilda on the shady side of the great tower. The air was warm and fragrant, even at that height, with the odour of the pines, and the sun was not yet high enough to make it unpleasantly hot. Through the bright, sunlit distance Greif could see many a familiar landmark of the forest, and as he sat there doing nothing, he amused himself half unconsciously with counting the points in the surrounding landscape which he had visited, and those he had never reached, and the number of the former greatly exceeded that of the rest. It was a very peaceful scene, and Greif breathed in the smooth refreshing

air with delight, while his eyes wandered lazily up and down the heights and along the feathery green crests of the forest's waves. For all the firs and pines were still tipped with the green of their new-grown shoots, though the autumn winds and the winter snows would soon stain the newcomers as black as the old boughs on which they grew. The time is short indeed, during which the Black Forest is not black, but takes a softer hue, and a warmer light. The autumn comes early, the spring comes late, there is but little summer, and the winter has it all to himself during the rest of the time. But though the summer days be few, they are of exquisite beauty, such as are rarely seen elsewhere in Europe. Greif knew, as he sat by his tower, that they were nearly over, and he was the more grateful for the delight of the soft sunshine, of the green treetops, of the fragrance of the forest coming up to his nostrils over the grey ramparts, of the short whistle of the shooting swallows, that seemed to spring up like the spray of a fountain out of the abyss

beneath, and after circling the highest pinnacle of the castle fell again with lightning speed into the cool depths below. Greif listened to the rushing noise of their wings, and to their short, clear cry, and he wished that Hilda were beside him, to help him to enjoy the more what already gave him such keen pleasure. To him, indeed, Sigmundskron still had the charm of novelty. Its situation on a high and projecting crag was very different from that of Greifenstein, which latter was but the three-cornered end of a precipitous promontory, cut off from the forest by its single enormous bulwark. Sigmundskron commanded a view of many miles over the landscape below, while Greifenstein lay much lower, and a man standing on the topmost rampart could but just look over the level sea of the treetops to the higher hills in the distance beyond.

Greif was very happy. It seemed to him as though all the possible unhappiness of his life had concentrated itself into a very short time, not extending over more than a few days, from the moment when he had

received news of the catastrophe in the hall at the banquet at Schwarzburg, to that in which the delirium of his fever had overtaken him. The rest had been but little troubled by the tragedy which had left him alone in the world. Nothing cuts us off from the past more effectually than a dangerous illness in which we are for the most part unconscious. Greif had felt, when he recovered, that he was completely separated from the former time, and the sensation had itself contributed to his recovery, by deadening the sense of pain that had been with him so constantly before he broke down altogether. Rex had not been ill, and to him the past did not seem so distant; moreover he knew what Greif did not know, and had greater cause for sadness. Greif was happy, and he knew it. It appeared impossible, so far as he could see, that anything should arise out of the gloom of Greifenstein to trouble his serenity in Sigmundskron. Every effort had been made by him and Rex together to discover some clue to the mystery, which for Rex was no

mystery any longer, and nothing had been found which could cast the smallest light upon what had happened. Rex suggested the possibility of a sudden madness having overtaken one or more of the party, and Greif was so easily satisfied, and so glad to bury the past, that he accepted the idea without defining it. He reflected, indeed, that under no imaginable circumstances could his present be touched or disturbed by the true explanation of the tragedy, should it ever be found, and he was content to let the tide of years flow silently over the place those terrible deeds held in his own life.

It is no wonder that he was happy now, since all his hopes were attained and all his desires satisfied. Being also of a faithful and persistent nature, his satisfaction was solid and permanent. Apart from the one dark spot which was so rapidly fading into the dim distance, he had no regrets; no dreams of what might have been sent rays of false light through his present, no images of disappointed desires haunted him in the

silent night, no shadows of a lost joy, still madly anticipated in the distorted anachronisms of a wounded heart, came between him and Hilda's glorious beauty. That misery of humanity was unknown to him, in which the soul still looks forward with a beating, throbbing hope to what the memory knows is buried in the depth and dust of twenty years. All was real, present, glorious, happy and complete. If any one had asked him what he most dreaded, he would have said that he dreaded death alone, death for Hilda, death for the sturdy little child that was to bear the name now his, death for himself, though for himself the fear was less than for the other two. That anything but death could bring back those days and nights of agony through which he had once passed, he did not and he could not believe. Even as he sat beneath the shadow of the tower on that summer's morning he asked himself the question, and the answer was the same as ever. Why, indeed, should he not be left in peace? Why should he even expect the possibility of evil? Evil might

come, assuredly, but it must come in some sudden, violent and unexpected shape out of the present, by accident, by illness, by death. The terrors of the past were with the past, and Greif was too strong, and young, and happy to expect misfortune in the present. He sat there, peacefully gazing at the green feathers of the firs and at the circling swallows, and almost laughing to scorn the possibility of a pain that was already near him, that was with him now, as Hilda's graceful figure emerged from the door of the tower and stood beside him.

Her face was still a little pale, but she looked almost supernaturally beautiful in her gravity. It is possible that if she had been transported into the midst of the world, of that company of half-morbid, half-enthusiastic beings which we define commonly as society, she might not have pleased those tired critics altogether as well as one of themselves, though she would assuredly have surprised them exceedingly, and perhaps when she began to grow old they would remember that they had never seen

anything like her. But here, in her natural surroundings, she was magnificent. She was dressed all in white, and the delicate shades of her colouring did not suffer by the contrast, but seemed more perfect and harmonious, blended as all the tints were by the all-pervading light of the clear mountain air in the thin, vapoury blue shadows of the old tower. And the rough grey stone was a harmonious background for her beauty and its rugged surface showed more completely the exquisite outlines of her face and figure. Greif saw her beside him, and could not repress his admiration.

'Hilda—how beautiful you are!' he exclaimed, springing to his feet and putting his arms about her.

It seemed as though her perfection had suddenly become visible out of the dream of his cloudless happiness. She smiled faintly as she kissed him, so faintly that he was surprised and drew back, looking into her face.

'Has anything happened, sweetheart?' he

asked anxiously. 'Is anything the matter? You are pale, darling, tell me——'

'Something has happened, Greif, and I will tell you,' she said, sitting down upon the long stone seat that ran round the base of the tower, and touching the spot beside her with the palm of her hand, as though bidding him do likewise.

His face grew grave as he took his place at her side, still looking into her eyes.

'It is something that pains you, dear—is it not?' he asked tenderly.

'Because it will pain you,' she answered. 'You must listen to my story patiently, Greif, for it is not easy to tell, and it is not easy to hear. But I will do my best, for it is best to tell it all quite plainly from beginning to end, is it not?'

'Yes,' answered Greif nervously. 'Please tell me all quite frankly.'

'It is about your father, Greif—about all that happened on that dreadful night at Greifenstein. Yes, darling, I will try and be quick. You know when—after they were dead, my mother went over, and did what

she could until you came. You know, too, that the house was full of servants, whom your father was always changing—you sent them all away last year. Well, one of those wretches stole—had the heart to steal at that fearful time—a coat—one that belonged to your father—indeed——' she hesitated.

'And you have found it?' asked Greif, whose face relaxed suddenly. He thought it was but a common theft, and was immensely relieved.

'Yes, we have found it,' continued Hilda. 'But it was not a common coat, dear—it was the very one in which—the one he had on, I mean, when——'

'I understand,' Greif said in a low voice.

Hilda looked away, and clasped her hands upon her knee, making an effort to tell her story connectedly. She knew that it would be far better that Greif should be prepared by the knowledge of the details which it would be hard to communicate to him afterwards.

'Yes,' she continued, 'and the wretched

servant took it to a Jew and sold it, and the Jew hid it—I suppose because he knew it was stolen—and long afterwards, only a very few days ago, he sold it to Wastei—and Wastei gave it to Berbel, and Berbel showed it to me.'

'Is it safe?' asked Greif, almost under his breath.

'Yes—quite safe.'

'Then I do not want to see it——'

'I have not told you all, dear. There is more. If it had been only that—but there is something else. The coat was torn inside, above the pocket, so that something that had been meant for the pocket had slipped down inside. It was very strange!'

'Something of his?'

'Of his—for you. Oh, Greif—it is the letter you searched for so long and could never find!

Greif's face turned white and his voice was thick and indistinct.

'Give it to me,' he tried to say, and he held out his hand to receive it.

Without another word Hilda drew the

sealed envelope from the bosom of her frock and gave it to him, not daring to look at him. Then she rose and would have left him alone, but with one hand he caught hers and held her back.

'Together, dear,' he almost whispered.

Greif was stunned and shocked. It seemed as though the dead man had risen from his grave to deliver his message himself, to tell his own story and reveal his own secret. With trembling fingers Greif turned the envelope over and over, scarcely able to read the superscription at first, then glancing curiously at the impress on the seal, doubting, as Hilda had doubted, that it was perhaps not genuine. But his memory told him the truth. He knew the paper well, and as trivial details come before the mind in the most appalling moments of life, so he remembered instantly the whole appearance of the library at Greifenstein, the table with the huge old silver inkstand, the rack that had held that very writing paper, the heavy, clumsy seal that had sealed that envelope, and which

always lay beside the blotter and next to the sealing wax. It all came back to him so vividly that, even if the letter had been a forgery, he would have believed it genuine, from the mere force of the associations it evoked. He held it in his hands and hesitated.

Within that narrow bit of folded paper was contained the secret of his father's death, of his mother's sudden end, of Rieseneck's suicide. He had not a doubt of it, though he had not realised it at first. A sort of mist veiled his eyes and darkened the glorious day. It seemed so strange that such a poor scrap of perishable rag should hold the key to so great a mystery, the solution to such a fearful question. Within that cover was a sheet of paper and on it he should see characters traced in a familiar hand. He closed his eyes and fancied that he already saw the writing, for he had often imagined how it would look, during his long search. Again and again in his dreams, he had laid his hand upon that envelope, and had broken the seal and had read those

short words of tender farewell which he felt must have been in his father's heart at the supreme moment. And now he held the reality and yet he shut out the light of day in order to call up the fancy that had so often consoled his imagination. But the reality was not one with the dreamland shadow. In the one there had been only words of love and sad regret, in this real letter was written the secret whose effects had so nearly ruined his life, a secret so terrible, that had Hilda guessed it she would have thrust the cruel message from the dead into the flames, rather than allow it to live and stab Greif to the heart.

Hilda did not understand his hesitation, though she knew as well as he himself that the yet unread words contained the solution of the great problem. But she sat patiently by his side, her white hand resting on his shoulder, her anxious face turned towards his, her lips already parted, as though but awaiting her breath to speak words of consolation for the suffering that had not yet begun.

Greif roused himself, as though ashamed of the emotion he had shown, though indeed he had seemed outwardly calm enough. He pressed his lips together and ran his finger through the upper side of the envelope, so as not to break the seal. His hands did not tremble any longer, and with the action all his dreams vanished in the broad light of the summer morning. Carefully he withdrew the sheet and spread it out.

'Shall I go, sweetheart? Would you rather be alone?' Hilda asked once more.

'No, darling. Read it with me—let us read it together,' he answered quietly, as though he were speaking in some sacred presence.

Hilda bent her golden head forward until it was close to his, and their cheeks touched as they read together the contents.

'My dear Greif, my beloved son—first of all, I remind you that you are a man and a brave one, and I solemnly enjoin upon you to act like one, and to put your trust in God. A great misfortune has befallen you, and at

the moment of death I look to you to bear its burden in a manner worthy of a German gentleman. Heaven will certainly atone to you for the injustice of a cruel destiny. Your mother was the lawful wife of my brother Rieseneck. She has deceived me for five and twenty years, until his sudden coming revealed to me all her crimes within an hour. You are therefore illegitimate and nameless, and not one penny of my fortune is yours. I am utterly dishonoured by this enormous wickedness. My brother and I have done justice upon the woman Clara Kurtz, Freiherrin von Rieseneck, after receiving her full confession, and nothing remains for us but to die decently. As for you, I need not point out your course. You will declare the truth to my cousin Therese von Sigmundskron, who is the sole heir to all my fortune and estates, being next of kin in the line of the Greifensteins. You will renounce your engagement to marry Hilda von Sigmundskron. You will enter the ranks and serve your king as a private soldier, which is the only course

open to a penniless gentleman. I know you too well to think you will hesitate a moment. My brother leaves a son by his wife, who goes by the name of Rex and to whom he is now writing. Perhaps it is the student of whom you have spoken often to me lately. He is your brother as Rieseneck is mine, and he is rich by his father's death. But you will accept nothing from him, nor from any one else except your sovereign, who, if he learns your story, may help you if he be graciously pleased to do so.

'My son, I am about to die. I have taken the law into my own hands and I must pay the penalty by the only hand to which I can submit. If I have been at fault towards you, if I have been deceived by this woman through any carelessness of mine, I, your father, implore your forgiveness at this final moment. And so I leave you. May the God of our fathers protect and bless you, and bring you to a nobler end than mine. Though you are nameless and penniless, you can yet be a Christian man; you can be true, you can be

brave, and you can give your life, which is all you have to give, to your king and your country. Farewell.—Your father,

'HUGO VON GREIFENSTEIN.'

Strange as it may seem, both Hilda and Greif read this long letter to the end before they paused, almost before they understood what it meant. Their two faces were livid, as they sat in the shadow of the tower, and gazed at each other with wild and staring eyes. The cold sweat of horror stood upon Greif's forehead, like the drops of moisture on a marble statue when the south wind blows.

But there was a vast difference between Greif's condition now and his state when he had broken down under the burden of his emotions eighteen months earlier. The calm and peaceful life had strengthened his character and fortified his nerves, and though Hilda expected every moment that he would sink down as he had done on that memorable day, almost unconscious with pain, he nevertheless sat upright in his seat,

bracing himself, as it were, against the huge wave of his misfortunes, which had risen from the depths of the tomb to overtake him and annihilate his happiness in a single moment. His comprehension seemed to grow clearer, and he grasped the whole frightful hopelessness of his enormous calamity.

Hilda understood it too, in a measure, but she thought only of his suffering, and not of any possible consequences to herself. With womanly tenderness, she took her handkerchief, and pressed the cool linen to his wet brow, while she could see his broad chest heaving and hear the dull, short sound of his breath between his grinding teeth. Her arms went round him, and tried to draw him to her, but he sat upright like a figure of stone, unbending as a block of granite.

'Greif!' she cried at last. 'Speak to me, dear one——'

'How can I speak to you, whom I have dishonoured?' he asked, slowly turning his head towards her and yet trying to draw back from her embrace.

'Dishonoured me! Ah, Greif——'

'Yes—Hilda, I am no more your husband than my wretched father was husband to the creature who bore me—who ruined him and me——'

'Greif—sweetheart, beloved, are you mad?'

'Mad? No! The merciful unhinging of that rack of torture which should be my mind, God has denied me. Mad? It were better, for your sake. Mad? I know not what I say. You are not my wife, nor Sigmund, Sigmund, nor I Sigmundskron, nor Greifenstein, nor Hilda's husband, nor anything that I wot of—save a nameless vagabond who has dishonoured Hilda——'

'Greif—for the love of Heaven——'

'Ay, I must speak, and quickly. It is better that you should know all the truth from these lips, foul from their birth—that have kissed yours, though they be not worthy to eat the dust in your path—these lips that kissed that vile thing they called my mother, and that spoke words of sorrow, and uttered cries of grief, at a death too decent for such a being—no, let me

speak, take your pure hands from me—I am not your husband! By a name that was never mine, I took your name—thank God you have it still! Your marriage is no marriage, your child is nameless as I am—do you know how the law would call me? One Greif, the bastard son of a certain Herr von Greifenstein and of a woman known as Clara Kurtz—that is the designation of all my honours, that is the description of your child's father, of the man you have called husband for twelve months and one day! The curse of God in Heaven on that wretch—she was not woman—may the furies of hell not tire of tormenting her accursed soul throughout all ages—yes—I mean my mother, I mean every word I say—I would say more if I knew how! She has done all this—she brought my father to his death, my brave old father, whom I loved, and she has brought me to shame worse than death; and worse than shame or death to me, she has brought dishonour upon the only creature left me to love—oh, death was made too easy for her by those merciful

men, they were a thousand times too pitiful, too kind!'

He paused, trembling in every limb with the wrathful passion for which words alone were no satisfaction. Hilda was startled at the violence of his language, and alarmed by the furious look in his eyes, but actual fear was too foreign to her nature to influence her. She understood, now, however, what had escaped her before, namely that he believed their marriage to have been no marriage at all in law. Then her love spoke out, softly at first and with a gentle accent.

'Greif, my beloved—let them rest in their graves! They cannot harm us.'

'Not harm us?' he cried. 'Do you know that every word I have told you is true—that the curse of that dead woman will pursue us to the end? Do you understand that we are not married man and wife?'

'That is not true,' answered Hilda. 'God made us man and wife——'

'Ay—but the law——'

'What is the law to us? Do we not love? Is not that law?'

'It may be in heaven——'

'And it is on earth. It is love that has made us what we are, by Heaven's help. It is neither man nor law, for my love is beyond all laws of men, save you! And this thing, what is it? A voice from the dead cries in our ears that we are not what we are, what I know we are, because a deed of shame was done long years ago of which we knew nothing, nor guessed anything until this moment. Is that justice; is that the law you fear and respect, the law you will allow to come between you and me? There is a better law than that, my beloved, the law that binds me to you with bands of steel, for good or ill, for shame or fame, for honour or dishonour——'

'Ah — the dishonour of it, Hilda, the dishonour!'

'The dishonour of what? Of a bit of paper, of a dead woman's sin and miserable death? Is that all? Or is it for name, or no name? And if it be that, what then? Do you think that if you were but a trooper in the ranks, calling yourself by any

meaningless syllables that it crossed your mind to choose, if you were the poorest soldier that ever drew sword, do you think that I would not follow you, and work for you and slave for you, and live as I could, or starve, rather than leave you for one day, a thousand times rather than be Hilda von Sigmundskron and heir to all the wealth of the Greifensteins, as that thing says I am? Could all the laws you talk of prevent me from doing that? And you talk of my dishonour through you! I would beg for you, I would toil for you, I would wear out my body and my soul to get you bread—oh, I would almost sell the hope of heaven for your dear sake! And you say that because you have found this paper I am not your wife! A bit of paper, Greif, between you and me—a bit of paper on the one hand and my love on the other, with all it means, with all that harm or pain to you could make it mean, does make it mean, now and for ever! Oh, my beloved, my beloved, have you loved me so long without knowing what love means?'

She would have twined her arm about his neck, but he hid his face in his hands and would not move. To himself, he seemed the basest of mankind, absolutely innocent as he was of every thought or intention of evil. He cursed his weakness in having yielded long ago, in having broken down into unconsciousness, to wake again, weak and enfeebled by his illness, no longer able to break through the spell that drew him towards her. He called himself, in his heart, a traitor, a coward, a weakling, a miserable wretch without strength, or faith, or honour. There were no bounds to his self-abasement, no depths to which he did not sink in his self-judgment. He recalled that morning eighteen months ago when he had come over to Sigmundskron to fight the battle of honour, he remembered the agony of that bitter struggle, the triumph of his heart when he had made the last desperate effort and had gone forth victorious, though the fever was already on him, and he could scarcely see the road under his feet. He reproached himself bitterly with having

yielded after winning such a fight, with having stooped to do the bidding of love, after having trampled down every loving instinct and every tender thought within him, in the proud consciousness of doing right for right's sake only. If he had but been brave still when his body was so weak, all that now was could not have been. He would have cared for neither name nor fame, still less for fortune, without Hilda. But he had yielded, he had grafted the infamy of his birth upon the spotless line of her he loved, and fate had done the rest. The relentless destiny which had overtaken his father, his mother and his brother, had tracked him down and struck him within the boundaries of the false paradise his weakness had built up. He said to himself that he, too, must die, for he was the last and the lowest of living men.

'Will you not be persuaded, Greif?' asked Hilda, after a long pause. 'Do you not see that I am right, and that you are wrong—wrong only in this?'

'I see nothing,' he answered, 'unless it

be that I have brought the most irretrievable dishonour upon all I love, as dishonour was brought upon me by him who loved me best.'

'And if I refuse to be dishonoured, what then?'

'What then? I do not know what then,' he answered half absently, not understanding her thoughts.

'Will you dishonour me in spite of yourself, in spite of my love?'

He did not answer this time, but buried his face in his hands once more, as though trying to shut out the sight of her from his aching eyes. The tones of Hilda's voice rose and fell faintly, as if they reached him through some thick substance that dulled their distinctness. At first he scarcely knew what she was saying, and he hardly cared.

'And if my love will not move you, then, I will tell you more,' she said, with a strong and rising intonation. 'I tell you that you have not dishonoured me, because I will not be dishonoured. You

and I have done right before God and before man until this day, and if there be wrong now it shall be right and I will make it right. I, Hilda von Sigmundskron, am your wife. I, Hilda von Sigmundskron, will not have it told to the world that I am a disgraced woman, that I am married to a nameless being, the mother of a nameless child. Your wife I am, and you are Sigmundskron and Greifenstein, and so you shall live and die, for I will make it law! There goes the law! Prove that you are a bastard if you can, and that I am a dishonoured woman!'

With a movement like a falcon swooping to the earth and soaring again to heaven, she had snatched the fallen letter from the ground. Before she had finished speaking, her desperate fingers had torn the paper to tiniest scraps and the light shreds were floating fast before the summer breeze, like snow-flakes in the sun, to the deep abyss below the castle wall.

CHAPTER XXIX

Greif sprang to his feet and seized Hilda by the wrist, his eyes and his whole expression full of horror and dismay.

'What have you done?' he cried.

'What you could not do,' answered Hilda boldly.

The colour had come back to her face, and the light to her eyes, and she met his gaze calmly and courageously. For some seconds neither moved, but stood looking at each other, he holding her tightly, she making no effort at resistance. Greif's first impression was that his wife had committed an act of sacrilege as well as a serious offence against the law. She had explained her meaning clearly enough when she tore up the letter, and he had under-

stood all the consequences of the act at once. It would be useless to attempt a search for the fragments of paper, which were already scattered on the breeze and floating down to the deep gorge. So far as the law was concerned, Hilda had spoken the truth. Not a shred of evidence remained to prove that he was not all to-day that he had been yesterday, in law as well as in fact. But there was gone with that evidence something precious to Greif, something which it had hurt him desperately to see torn to scraps and flung away. He had loved his father with all his heart, and the letter had contained his father's last solemn blessing, of which not a single word remained whole; not even if one of those bits of floating paper that whirled and floated down the precipice had preserved a syllable of the message, was it in the power of human skill or strength to save it from reaching the bottom of the abyss and being swept away to the distant river by the tumbling stream.

Nevertheless Hilda's quick and decisive

action had produced the effect of a salutary shock upon her husband's mind and nerves. She, as usual, felt that absolute certainty of having done right which was a part of her strong character.

'You have destroyed it all,' said Greif at last in a reproachful tone. 'You have left no two words together——'

'And I am glad. I would do it again, if need were.'

'It cannot be undone,' Greif answered gloomily. He dropped her wrist and began to walk slowly backwards and forwards in the shadow of the tower.

'How could you do it! How could you do it!' he repeated in a low voice, as though speaking to himself and without looking at her.

'It was the only thing to be done,' she answered firmly.

'But the injustice of it—the illegality—what shall I call it?' he stopped in his walk.

'Call it what you please,' replied Hilda scornfully. 'It does not exist any more.

It may not have been a legal act, but it was an act of justice, whatever you may say, of the truest justice, and I would do it again.'

'Justice!' exclaimed Greif bitterly. 'If justice were done, I should be——'

'Stop,' said Hilda in a determined tone. 'Justice is done and you are here, and you are what you were yesterday and shall be to-morrow, not for me only, but for the whole world. That is the only justice I can understand.'

'Hilda, it is wrong,' cried Greif. 'I know it is. I have no right to throw off what has been brought upon me, what is proved so clearly—it is a wrong and a great wrong, and it must be repaired.'

'A wrong to whom?' Hilda asked, with flashing eyes. 'Whose would your fortune be if you renounced it for the sake of that thing I have destroyed? It would be my mother's—mine, would it not? The letter said so. And the name of Greifenstein, to whom would it go, if you proclaimed through the whole land that you had no

right to it? To no one. It would end. No one would ever bear it, for no one has a right to dispose of it except, perhaps, my mother——'

'Yes—your mother——'

'My mother! Would you break her heart by telling her that she has given my father's name to——'

Hilda stopped short in her speech.

'To me!' exclaimed Greif in the bitterest self-reproach. 'Oh, the shame of it, Hilda, the shame of it all! You are right in that—to think that she has given the name she loves to one who has no right to any name—it would break her heart——'

'Then let her never know it, nor guess it, nor dream that it is possible, never, never, so long as she lives!'

'It is not for her only—it is for you, Hilda! That is the worst to bear—the shame, the shame!'

'For me?' The two words came slowly and distinctly from her lips, as though she were trying to make clear to him the enormity of his speech. Then she drew herself

up proudly to her full height, and a wonderful smile illuminated her face.

'Not for me, Greif,' she said. 'There is no shame for me. In your love, I am above all earthly shame.'

There was something in her manner and in the accent of her speech that affected Greif very suddenly. He was gradually growing more calm and better able to reason, as well as to realise the splendid depth of his wife's love. There was a ring in her voice that told him more than her words could tell. He came to her, and took her hand, and kissed it, almost devotionally.

'You are above all earthly women,' he said simply.

'I? No. Any woman would do as much, and it is so little. If you would only think, dear, it is so very little—and it is for myself, too. Could I do anything else? Could any woman do less, even the most selfish?'

'I know none who would do as much,' Greif answered.

'Did I not tell you, that it was for my own sake that I destroyed the letter, that I would not be dishonoured, that I would not have the world say—what it might say?'

'That is not all, Hilda.'

'It is all—except my love, and that is all indeed, all there is for me.'

'Ay, that is it, that is it! And if these hideous crimes are never known to any one but you and me, can you live beside me, day by day, year by year, and never feel one pang, one regret, one little thrust of shame? I know you love me, but that is too much to ask of any love. I know that you mean what you say, but it is too much for man or woman to say and mean. Think of it, Hilda, think of it all—there are such things here as angels could not forget!'

'I love you very, very much — my memory has no place for any other things.'

She twined her arm about his neck as they stood together, and she laid her golden head upon his shoulder, while her bright eyes looked upwards with a sidelong glance

into his face. But his cheek was pale and cold, and he gazed sternly out at the distant crags, as though he would not see her. The unbearable conviction of disgrace was upon him, hopeless, endless, embracing all his existence and already extending back in his imagination to all his earlier youth. Her hands burned him, her touch was like the shock of death, as the old mystics used to say the draught of life would be to the lips of the unprepared and the impure.

'Let me go,' he said gently. 'I cannot bear it.'

But she would not. Instead of one arm, both went round him. He felt as if her strong embrace would lift him from his feet, out of himself, to bear him away from all trouble and woe to endless peace.

'I will not let you go—neither now nor ever, neither in this world nor the next.'

He knew that tone of hers, deep, ringing and clear, and he knew that she was desperate. Then the conflict began in his own soul, the struggle between that deep conviction of law and right, which was the

foundation of his character, and that honest and all-sacrificing love that filled his heart.

'Give me time to think what I am doing,' he said.

He sat down upon the seat in his old place and bent down, pressing his temples with his hands. He had spoken very simply out of his great distress, for he needed time to think of what he was doing, and of what he must yet do. All was vague and moving in the vision of his mind, like a distant landscape seen through the trembling, heated air at noontide on a summer's day. Nothing was distinct, save his love for Hilda on the one side, and upon the other, the black shadow of his awful disgrace.

'Think, my beloved, if you will,' said Hilda softly. 'You will but think what I have thought already.'

Perhaps he felt, even then, that she was right, but he could not so soon be comforted, nor put aside in a moment what had presented itself so strongly as an inexorable duty. At that juncture a cunning man of law could have persuaded him more easily

than the woman he loved more than all the world besides. As had happened before, in the old days, that love appeared to him in the light of a temptation, beautiful as the broad sun, eloquent as sweetest music. But there was this difference, now, that the opposite course was not as plain as it had been then. Instead of a straight path, he saw but a confused medley of conflicting ideas, of which the whole sum represented to his mind a mysterious notion of a necessary sacrifice, but in which it was impossible to distinguish the discriminating point, the centre of action, the goal of duty. In the first place, he recognised out of this chaos, his father's injunction to act like a Christian man, to give up all that was not his, to lay aside the name he had borne and to go forth into the world with nothing but his own courage and perseverance as his weapons. That was clear enough. If the letter had come into his hands immediately, as it had been intended that it should, he would have fulfilled his father's last commands bravely in every detail of their spirit. Even if he

had received the message on the eve of his marriage, after he had begun to call himself Sigmundskron, even then he would have done the same; and though it would have been mortal agony, it would have been easy to do, so far as the mere execution of it was concerned. He would have gone to Frau von Sigmundskron, and would have told her the truth, showing her the letter, and taking the consequences. No woman alive, in such a case, would have hesitated a moment, he thought. Hilda's mother would certainly not have had the least doubt how to act, for she would have died rather than give her daughter to a man of illegitimate birth. She would have offered him his fortune, no doubt, for she was a noble and generous woman, but he would have refused to take anything. That at least would not have cost him a pang. As for the rest, his course would have been clear enough.

But now, it was a very different matter. His conscience still told him to go to Frau von Sigmundskron and tell all, but the consideration of the consequences appalled him.

He knew better even than Hilda herself, what a sacrifice the good lady had made in regard to the name, and what importance she attached to it. She was perfectly happy in the existing condition of things; to tell her would be to destroy her happiness for ever, to the last day of her life. Greif felt that if he were in her place he should not want to know the truth, since all reparation was now utterly impossible. And yet, to conceal it looked like a crime, or at least like an action of bad faith. Could he meet the white-haired lady who loved him so well and who had built such hopes upon him, could he meet her daily, and call her mother, as she loved to be called, and yet feel that he was deceiving her, that he had defiled the name she had given him, and that he was living in possession of all that the law made hers? It might be true that all would be Hilda's some day, and that in the end no harm would be effected because it would go to Hilda's son. But the fortune was not Hilda's yet, and she to whom it really belonged, who had really the power to control

all, and to turn Greif and her own daughter from home and hearth if she pleased, was to all intents dependent upon the generosity of both. Though she might be made to accept much, yet it seemed a positive wrong that she should be allowed to feel that she was receiving favours when she was in reality conferring them.

Greif therefore should go to her, and tell his story, and acknowledge that everything was hers and that he was beholden to her charity for the bread he ate at her table. He had the courage to do so, and he would do it, if it seemed wholly right. But if he thus satisfied his love of justice, he must also do her an injury of a very different kind. It would be cruel to disclose the truth. Even Hilda had said that it would break her mother's heart if she were told that she had given what she most prized to a nameless bastard. Hilda had not said the word, but it had been in her mind, nevertheless. And Frau von Sigmundskron had given more than that, for she had bestowed upon him her only daughter. Should he make

her declining years miserable with the shame that was upon him, in order to give her money, or should he keep what was hers in order that she might end her life in happiness and peace? It was a case of doing evil that good might come.

When such a question arises there can be but one answer. The good to be obtained must be immense and the evil must be relatively very small. If such a position could be imagined, a man would be justified in lying, stealing or doing almost anything which could only hurt himself, for the sake of saving a nation, of preserving his country from destruction. Perhaps he would not be wrong, if it were to save a thousand innocent lives, a hundred, ten, even one, if he wronged only himself in the evil he did to attain his end. But as the ratio diminishes, the case becomes manifestly more difficult to judge, and the absolute nature of right asserts itself more strongly when it is not confronted by overwhelming odds in most exceptional circumstances. Stealing is bad, but there is a difference between the case of

the starving mother who steals a crust for her dying child, and the professional thief who lives riotously upon the proceeds of his crimes; there is a difference of degree in evil between stealing money in order to render possible the escape of a beloved sovereign from the hands of a bloodthirsty and revolutionary mob and stealing it, under the apparent protection of the law, by deceiving thousands in the game of finance.

Nothing can be more repugnant to a man of honour than to do evil of any sort in order that good may come. To such a man as Greif, lying is but a shade less bad than murder, and stealing is many shades worse. In his judgment of the situation he was called upon both to steal and to lie, in order to secure Frau von Sigmundskron's happiness. It was true that the deception was to be practised by merely holding his tongue, and the theft by keeping what did not belong to him, but Greif made no such subtle distinctions of degree. It was lying and stealing. It was adding a disgrace by his own conduct to the shame he had inherited. It

was to give up all that remained to him, which was his spotless honesty in thought and deed. The case seemed terribly strong.

There was Hilda, by his side, and she had said that she would not let him go. Suppose then that he went and told her mother the story. There would be one more person in the secret, for though she might die of grief, she would never tell a human being; she could not ever be called upon to do so, by the maddest exaggeration of the principles of honour. She would suffer horribly, but she would not take what was hers. She could have no use for the fortune, except to give it to her daughter, who had the use of it already. Her peace would be destroyed for ever, and there would be no change in the conditions under which the three were living, except that Greif would have satisfied his desire to be strictly honest. A moral satisfaction on the one hand, and the destruction of all happiness to one he loved on the other. His brain reeled, for his desire to be truthful suddenly appeared to him in the light of a selfish

passion which would cause endless pain to those whom he most desired to shield from all suffering. This was another view, and a strangely unexpected one.

The chaos of his thoughts became wilder and more unsettled than ever, he dropped his hands upon his knees and leaned back against the rough stones of the tower, pale and exhausted with the struggle, but uncertain yet how he should act. Hilda sat motionless beside him, watching his movements, and to some extent understanding his thoughts, ready to give him her sympathy or her counsel, if he needed it, ready, too, to throw all the force of her undaunted nature into the contest if he should endeavour to maintain his first position. She was, indeed, terribly anxious, lest in a moment of excitement he should break away from her and go to her mother in his present frame of mind. A long time had passed in silence, far longer than it has taken to describe the thoughts that succeeded each other in Greif's brain, but Hilda would not speak, nor interrupt the course of his re-

flexions. She knew that this was the decisive moment of their lives, and she understood her husband's stubbornly honourable nature well enough to give him leisure to consider all the points of his position.

At last he spoke, not looking at her and still leaning his head against the stones.

'It is hard to talk of it,' he said. 'And yet I must, for I cannot think without words. I must decide, and quickly. In another hour I may meet your mother. I must either tell her, or not tell her, and this must be final. If I do——'

'She will die,' interrupted Hilda. 'Not to-day, not to-morrow, perhaps not this year. But it will eat up her heart. I know her. She will spend hours in her room, alone, looking at my father's picture, and crying over his sword. All her dreams will go out, like a light extinguished in the dark. All her hopes will be broken to pieces. She will never feel again that you are a son to her, and that through you the Sigmundskrons have begun again. She will grow more

silent, more thin and wan until the end; and then she will die. That is what will happen if you tell her.'

'And why should not all that happen to you, who know?' asked Greif.

'Because I love you yourself, and not an idea,' answered Hilda. 'If you were taken from me, I should die, as my mother will if you kill the idea she loves.'

'And is it better that my whole life should be a lie from this day forth, than that she should know the truth, and do what she can to meet it?'

'To whom do you owe the truth, Greif? To the woman you have married, to the mother of your child, or to some one else? What good would she get by it? Your money? She does not want money. What is money to her, compared with the memory of him she loved, as I love you, or in comparison with the honour of his name, for which she would give her blood?'

'And if you had left me alone to read that letter—would you have had me keep the truth from you too?'

'Would I have you bear alone anything that we can bear together? If you understand my love so little as to think that such a thing could change it, or weaken it, or make me what I am not—why then, I would not care what you did, nor what became of me!'

'And my shame is nothing to you?'

'Nothing, being what it is, not yours, but of others, thrust upon your innocence.'

'You would not, for your own sake, wish that we had never known of it?'

'For my sake? No. For yours—I would die to wash it out. For my sake, do you say? Oh, Greif, is one hair of your head, one look of your dear eyes less wholly mine, because your mother sinned? Are you not Greif to me, always, and nothing else?'

'And so you love me still—just as you did before?'

'Can I say more than I have said? Can I do more than I have done? Ah—then love must be too cold a word for what I mean!'

'You would not love me if I lied, and were a coward.'

'You would not be Greif.'

'Nor should I be my miserable self, if I acted this lie before your mother!'

'You would not be Greif, if you could kill her with the vanity of selfish truth-telling.'

'The vanity? Ay, I have thought of that. Perhaps I am vain, after all—I, who have but little left to be proud of.'

His head sank on his breast, and he sighed bitterly, wringing his fingers together. He wished he could shed tears, and cry aloud, and faint, as some women do.

'And yet—you have me—not to be proud of, but to love,' said Hilda gently.

'In spite of all? Is it really true, quite true?' He shook his head doubtfully.

'It is true.'

Hilda had no words left with which to persuade him of her unfaltering love, but perhaps at that moment the simple little phrase, with the accent she gave it, told Greif more than many protestations. It

seemed to him that the course of his distress was checked suddenly, and that he felt the strain of the cable upon the firm anchor at last. It was the hour of destiny, when one word decides the future of many lives, for good or evil.

'Thank God!' Greif exclaimed in a low voice. He put out his hand and took hers. 'I will never ask you again, dear,' he said presently. 'It was hard to believe, it seemed as though I ought not to believe it.'

In spite of all, there was a happy light in his eyes, as he turned them to her and gazed into her face. After all, the terrible things told in the letter had happened long ago, and he was young, in the midst of a glorious present, in the very midst of all that love and happiness could give. It would be many a long year before he could think calmly of the hideous secret, and perhaps his whole life from that day would be more thoughtful and serious than it had been. But it was not in the power of an evil fate to follow him further than that. The curse of the Greifensteins, as people a hundred

years ago would have called that strange chain of circumstances in which his race had been involved, had run its course, and had spent itself in the conflict with a woman's love. Beyond that there was nothing but the smooth haven of rest, which no blast of evil could ruffle, and into which no overwhelming wave of calamity could break.

Greif scarcely knew how it was that the struggle ended, nor why, when it was over, he felt that he had not lost the day. But nevertheless, it was so, and peace descended upon his soul. For a long time neither he nor Hilda spoke. Very gradually, the colour returned to Greif's face, and the light to his eyes; very gradually the luminous veil of his happiness descended between him and the shades of the evil dead, not cutting off the memory of their deeds, but hiding the horror of their presence.

'And so Rex is my brother,' he said at last.

'And mine,' said Hilda.

'He does not know—or does he?'

'How could he?'

'His father wrote to him—was that letter lost too? Is that yet to come?' Greif's heart sank at the thought that all was not over yet.

'But if he had known,' said Hilda, 'could he have hidden it so long? And besides, he came with you. If there had been a letter to him, you would have known of it. Who could have given it to him, without your knowledge?'

'Your mother.'

'She never told me of it, though she often wondered that you had nothing.'

'Rex knows!' exclaimed Greif in a tone of conviction. 'And he received the letter. I have told you how it was that he confessed to me his real name. He was telling the truth then, for I know him well. He would as soon have told me that he was my brother as my cousin——'

'He would have hesitated to do that——'

'No. You do not know him. He does not value his life a straw, and would as soon have taken that opportunity of parting with it as any other.'

'But how could he have concealed it since? Why should my mother have never told us that his father wrote?'

'Because she felt that I should have been pained to think that Rex had received something and I nothing. It is as clear as day. It explains many things. No one but a brother could have acted as he did all through my illness. I have often seen him looking at me strangely, and I never understood what it meant until now. He knew, and I did not. Besides——'

'What?' asked Hilda, as he stopped short.

'Well, it would explain, too, why he was so anxious that you and I should be married. If he knew—and he did, I am sure—he saw that if I persisted he would have to tell me the truth, in order that you should have the fortune. I used to wonder why he pressed me so.'

'Do you think that was it?'

'What else could he do? He must have ruined me, his brother, if the marriage had not taken place.'

'Would he have done that?' asked Hilda.

'Rex believes in nothing but honour,' Greif answered thoughtfully. 'There is nothing in heaven or earth which could keep him from doing what he thinks honourable. He would ruin me or himself with perfect indifference rather than see an injustice done by the fault of either.'

'He is a strange man.'

'He is a grand man, noble in every part of him, splendidly unselfish, magnificently brave—I wish I were like him.'

'I should not love you. He is cold as stone, though he may be all that you say, and though I am very fond of him.'

'Yes—he is cold. He never loved a woman in his life. But I admire him and respect him, though I never quite understand him. There is always something that escapes me, something beyond my reach. Perhaps that is what they call genius.'

'And yet no one has heard of him. He has never done anything with his talent.

It is strange, too, for he is immensely wise. I wonder what the reason can be.'

'He does not believe in anything—not even in greatness,' answered Greif. 'I believe his mind is so large that the greatest things seem little to him. I have heard him talk about almost everything at one time or another. The end of all his arguments is that nothing is worth while. And there is a reason, too. His father's disgrace has pursued him since he was a child.'

Greif's voice fell suddenly, and his face grew dark.

'And what should I be, then!' he exclaimed a moment later.

'What he is, were you in his place,' Hilda answered. 'But you are not, you see.'

'But for you, Hilda, but for you.'

'You for me, and I for you, my beloved. That is what love means.'

'I have seen what it means to-day,' said Greif.

Their hearts were too full for either of them to speak much so soon as they ap-

proached the question which had so nearly destroyed all their happiness. For a long time they were silent, unconscious of the swift flight of the hours, little guessing what a strange drama was being enacted almost beneath their feet, in the solitary room where Rex had determined to lay down the burden of life in the cause of honour.

'I must go to him,' said Greif at last.

'To Rex?'

'Yes. I must know how much he knows —though I am sure he knows all.'

'Will you tell him if he does not know?'

'Shall I?'

'He is your brother. He will see it as I do. It is best that he should know.'

'Come then, dear,' said Greif rising from his seat.

'Shall I go with you?'

'I will bring him out of his room, if he is there, and you can wait a moment in the passage. If not, we will go on together and find him.'

'It is twelve o'clock!' exclaimed Hilda,

glancing up at the great dial in the tower as she rose.

'It has not struck yet,' answered Greif carelessly.

They entered the winding staircase together and went down.

CHAPTER XXX

Rex's room was situated in the upper story of the castle, at no great distance from the staircase through which Greif and Hilda descended. Greif knocked and opened the door almost simultaneously, not waiting for permission to enter. Hilda stood in the corridor outside.

With a sharp exclamation Greif sprang forward. Fortunately, his presence of mind did not forsake him, and he did not hesitate an instant. Before Rex could pull the trigger of his revolver, Greif had grappled with him and was trying to wrest the weapon from his grasp. It was an even match, or very nearly so. Neither spoke a word while they both twisted and wrenched and strained for the mastery. Greif's

superior height gave him some advantage, but Rex was compactly built and very strong.

Very probably, if Greif had made a less sudden entry, Rex would have laid the pistol down with all his usual calm, and would have postponed his intention until he had got his brother out of the room. But Greif had sprung upon him very unexpectedly, and Rex knew instantly that he was detected in his purpose, and must either execute it now or give it up, and resign himself to being treated like a madman, and watched by lynx-eyed keepers day and night.

Hilda, who heard the noise of the scuffle, but had no idea that such a contest was taking place, approached the open door, supposing from the sound of shuffling feet that the two men were hunting some animal that had got into the room. Just as she stood before the threshold, and caught sight of Greif and Rex wrestling for life, Greif to take the pistol, Rex to put it to his own head, she heard a low, angry voice which

she did not recognise. It was more like the growl of an angry wild beast than anything else. Rex was not getting the better in the fight, though he had not lost much. His object was to bring the muzzle of his revolver against his own head, while Greif was doing his utmost to prevent the movement.

'Let me go!' exclaimed Rex in deep, vibrating tones. 'Let me go, man—I love your wife, and I mean to die!'

With a violent effort he twisted his hand upwards, lowering his head as much as he could at the same moment. As the charge exploded, the bullet went crashing through the mirror, and the weapon was wrenched away by other hands than Greif's, whiter and smaller, but scarcely less strong. Hilda had seen the danger and had joined in the struggle at the critical moment, just in time to save Rex from a dangerous wound, if not from actual death. She had got possession of the chief object of contention, not without risk of being injured herself.

Rex's efforts ceased almost immediately.

Between his anger at having been forced to relinquish his intention and his profound horror at seeing Hilda at his side almost at the moment when he had said that he loved her, Rex had no strength left. Only a supreme struggle, at once moral and physical, could have forced from his lips the words he had spoken. For a few seconds only his presence of mind failed him. Then the superiority of his nature over ordinary mankind asserted itself. He gently pushed Greif's hands away, and drew back a step in the direction of the door.

'You know my secret now,' he said, with a quiet dignity that was almost beautiful to see. 'I ask but the favour of being left alone.'

'I will not leave you for an instant——' Greif began, but Hilda interrupted him and passed him quickly.

She came to Rex and laid one hand upon his shoulder, and looked into his eyes.

'Do you love me? Is it true?' she asked earnestly, while Greif looked on amazed.

'But for your hand, I should have died with the confession on my lips,' Rex answered. 'I love you, yes.'

'Then live, for my sake!' said Hilda, holding out the hand that had saved him.

'For your sake?' Rex repeated the words as though scarcely understanding them.

'For my sake and for his,' Hilda answered, pointing to Greif.

'With that sin against him in my heart? No. I will not. It would be but a traitor's life, a dog's life. I will not.'

'You shall, and you will!' said Hilda, with that grand conviction of power, she had shown more than once during her life. 'Only a man who has tried to die is worthy to live in such a case. Do you know what my husband is to you?'

'I know it better than he. I have known it long.'

'Not better than he, or than I. We have learnt the secret to-day.'

'You know!' exclaimed Rex in great surprise. 'Look at those ashes, there upon the floor—they are all I have left of it—

and you know! No—you cannot, it is impossible——'

'We know that you are brothers,' said Hilda, taking his hand in spite of him. 'There is no secret any more, between us three——'

'And you know that I love you, that I love my brother's wife, and you would have me live?'

'Yes,' said Greif, who had not spoken yet. 'I would have you live, through all our lives, and I would have you two love each other with all your hearts, as I love you both.'

Rex stared at him, and then at Hilda. He raised one hand, and passed it over his eyes.

'I do not understand,' he said, in a low voice.

'It is because I understand, that I speak as I do,' Greif answered earnestly. 'It is because I know that not a nobler man than you breathes in the world. It is because there is but one Hilda in the earth, and she is mine, as I am hers.'

'You are not human, my brother,' said Rex. 'You should wish me dead.'

'If you were any other man but Rex, I might. Being what you are, I wish that we three may never part.'

'Never!' exclaimed Hilda. 'Ah, Horst, do you not see that you are my brother too? Do you not feel that I am your sister—and should brothers and sisters such as we are be made to part?'

'I cannot tell,' Rex answered. 'If you would have me live, I can but give you what life is left in me. You know me now. You know what I only learned of myself last night, and what I would have taken to the grave, unknown to any one, to-day. If in your eyes I am so far less base than in my own, if you can look upon me and not loathe me, if you can think of me and not call me traitor, why then this life is yours. And yet, I wonder that you can, seeing that I am what I am. Would you know how it came? You may know if you will, there is less shame to me in that than in the rest. I loved in a dream. I made

myself the father of this Hilda in my shadowy visions; I made in my thoughts a mother for her, like her, dead long ago, whom I had loved. I talked with a shadow, I loved a shadow, and the unreal phantasm I loved grew to be like Hilda herself—so like that when I saw they were the same, last night, here upon this very spot, I knew that I must die and quickly. The shadow was the living wife of him for whom I would give all, of my only friend, of my only kinsman, of my only brother. And so, if you had not hindered me, I should have been but a shadow now, myself. It had been best, perhaps. But my life is yours, do with it what you will. It is yours in all honour, such as it is. It was not to escape from torment that I would have died; it was not because I feared by word or deed to break the seal and to show you what was in me. It was to rid my brother and the world of a wretch who had no claim to live.'

'More right than I, or many a better man than I am,' said Greif, laying his hand upon his brother's shoulder.

'Be wise, Greif,' answered Rex. 'Think well of what is to come. Think well whether you can trust me and trust yourself. For me—I care little. A touch of the finger, a little noise, and you would be rid of me for ever. There is a safety in death, which life cannot give.'

'Do not talk any more of death, dear Horst,' said Hilda. 'It is but a year and a few months since two brothers and one woman, three as we are, in the same bonds save one, all stood together as we stand, perhaps, and by their deeds and deaths wiped away death from our lives. Talk no more of death now—in this other home, where there are other names than those that were dishonoured. Let this be the house of life, as that was the house of death, the home of honest love, as that was the home of treachery, the dwelling of peace, as that was made at last the place of violent and desperate deeds. The hour of destiny is passed. The days without fear begin to-day.'

It was indeed the decisive moment in

the lives of all three, and there was silence for a space after Hilda had spoken. The thoughts her words called up passed rapidly through the minds of her hearers and produced their effect on each. As she had truly said, there was a mysterious resemblance between the climax and the anti-climax of their history. As Rieseneck and Greifenstein had been half-brothers, so were Greif and Rex; as their fathers had loved one woman, so they also both loved Hilda; as the elder pair might have been, but for the woman who wrought their destruction, honourable brave and earnest men, so were their sons in reality—the difference lay not so much between the fathers and the sons, as between one woman and the other, between Clara Kurtz and Hilda von Sigmundskron. Instead of ruining both brothers, as Clara had done, Hilda had saved both from destruction, in the place of shame she had brought honour, in the stead of death she had given life to both. And both looked at her during the silence and wondered inwardly at the beauty of her strength, asking

themselves how it was possible that in a few short months this child of the forest, innocent and ignorant of the world, should have attained to proportions that were almost divine in their eyes, should have developed from the simple maiden to the noble woman, from the quiet, gentle girl, to the splendidly dominating incarnation of good, that had more than once overcome their mistaken impulses, and made plain their way before them by the illumination of the right, just as her golden head and gleaming eyes seemed to light up the room in which she stood. They looked at her and wondered, both loving her beyond all earthly things, each in his own way; the one with the earnest, deep-rooted purpose to live and die in all honour for her sake, silent for ever, having spoken once, doing daily homage to her innocence and loveliness, and reverently sacrificing every day for her the very love whereby he lived; the other, loving in her the wife, the mother of his sons, the source of all the glorious happiness that had come upon his early

manhood in such an abundant measure, the woman who had saved him, the woman he adored, the woman who was his, as he was hers. Neither had known before how great and good she was, and from this day neither would ever forget one shade of the goodness and the greatness she had revealed to both.

A baser man than Rex would have suffered and would have foreseen suffering throughout his coming days, in dwelling beside the woman who could not be his. But he was made of better stuff than most men, and his passion had received a stern and sudden check from the force of his commanding will. It was as though Hilda had been deified before him, and had been lifted to a sphere in which he could worship her as a higher being and forget that she was a woman. He bowed his head in thought, while Hilda and Greif stood before him. They saw the white streaks in the soft hair that had been so brown and bright but yesterday, and they glanced at each other, awestruck at the thought of what he must have suffered.

'His hair is white—and it is for me!' Hilda whispered as she leaned upon her husband's shoulder.

Rex's quick ear caught the words, though they were scarcely audible. He looked up, and his stony eyes grew strangely soft and expressive. 'Yes,' he said. 'I know it—but it is not strange. I am glad it is so, for it was in a good cause. You are right, Hilda, my sister—the hour of destiny is passed. It has left its marks, but they are pledges that it will not return. The new life begins to-day—give me your hands, both of you—do mine tremble so? It is with happiness, not with pain—oh, not with pain, do not think it! Give me a share in your lives, since you will. I take it gladly, and you shall not regret it. You have my word that you shall never feel one sting when you look at me, you, my brother, you, my sister. I will be a brother to you both, a son to her you both call mother, though, in truth, I am too old for that—but she must be a mother to us all, in place of what none of us have ever had, save

Hilda. And I kiss your hand, dear sister—so—it is the pledge—I take yours in mine, brother, and I know you, and you know me, and we can look each into the other's eyes and say I trust, and know that we trust well. There—it is done, and we are joined, we three, for good or evil, to stand together if there be strife still in store for us who have striven so much, to live in brotherly love and peace, if peace is to be ours, until the grey years come and we are laid side by side together.'

'So be it, and may God bless us all,' said Greif.

'God will bless us,' answered Hilda softly.

One more pressure of the hands and then Greif and Hilda turned and went away. The door closed softly behind them, and Rex was alone.

He went and took up the revolver that Hilda had laid upon the table, looked at it long, and then placed it in the drawer, and turned the key upon it. Once more he sat down where he had sat so long, and buried

his face in his hands, and pressed them to his aching eyes.

The greater sacrifice was accomplished now, and he knew that it was over, and that his years would be in peace, for all was clear and honest and true as the day. He looked up at last, upwards as though searching for something above him, straining his weary sight for a vision that was not granted him.

'I have lived,' he said aloud, in a strange voice. 'I had never lived before, never in all this time. And if they are right, if You are there, You, their God—then bless me too, with them, and make me like them! Is that a prayer? Why then, I will say Amen, and be it so! It is the only prayer I could ever pray now, to be like them, to be like them—yes, only that, to be like them!'

And Rex meant what he said. He was incapable of seeing that he himself had done anything more than his plain and honourable duty. He knew that he had overcome what had seemed most base in his own eyes,

but he would have been amazed if any one had suggested that any credit was due to him for that, since he had but obeyed the law of honour, the only law he knew or recognised. In his own estimation he was not less contemptible for having harboured a thought which would have been dishonourable only if it had been base and gross, but which, being so pure and sacred, was but the natural expression of a noble heart. But he saw in Hilda and Greif a generosity which seemed boundless when confronted with the evil of which he judged himself guilty, and he felt that genuine gratitude which only a high-souled being can feel in such a case.

Perhaps, if the truth were told, Rex was himself the noblest of the three. It is certain that he had suffered most, and he had assuredly suffered bravely, and fought against what he hated in himself with an earnestness and true-hearted purpose worthy of a good man. Hilda and Greif thought so, at least, as they walked slowly away from his room.

'We have seen a strange and wonderful

sight, my beloved,' said Greif, as they came out together again upon the terrace. They had returned thither instinctively in order to be alone.

'Wonderful indeed. Ah, Greif, you were right when you said that he was a grand man. I never thought that there were such men as that nowadays.'

'And we were wrong to say that he was cold.'

'You saw his hair? I was frightened when I thought of what he must have suffered, to make a change like that! Oh, Greif, is it my fault? Have I any fault in it? I should never rest again, if I thought so.'

'What fault of yours can there be?'

'Do you remember, long ago, on that day when you came to ask my mother, here, on this very terrace—I told you to speak to him?'

'Yes. What of it?'

'Perhaps it was vanity after all. Perhaps, if I had let him hate me, or dislike me, or whatever it was—all this might never have

happened. It is my fault, it is, I know it is!'

'No, darling—it is not. Things could not then have gone on as they were going, and we both did right. You heard his story—you know how truthful he is. He told us exactly what had happened to him, and he told us for that very reason, in order to make it clear that he had not known it all along, but had realised it suddenly, as he said he did. If he had guessed before, that he was in danger of loving you, he would not have stayed a day under our roof. But it came upon him all at once, and when it came upon him it was too strong, and too great.'

'And besides, he knew that you were his brother, from the first. That made it worse. How wonderfully he has kept the secret through all this time!'

'There is nobody like him. There is only one Rex in the world,' said Greif in a tone of conviction.

'And there is only one Greif in the world,' Hilda answered.

'Fortunately. Do you know? I feel as if Rex were really going to make it easier for us.'

'Easier? How?'

'Easier to keep this thing from your mother. Hilda—it is a fearful story! As we stood there together, when you were speaking, I felt it all, I saw those other three, I heard their voices, I knew what they must have felt and thought and said, on that night. It must have been an awful scene. And here are we—two brothers, as they were — ah, the difference is in you, darling—how can I ever thank you for being Hilda!'

'By loving me, sweetheart. Do not think of that in any other way. Besides, you owe me nothing. I cannot help loving you. If I did not love you I might hate you, though I think I should admire you, all the same.'

'Admire me!' exclaimed Greif, with an honest laugh.

'You were grand to-day—you were so generous!'

'I do not see much generosity——'

'You are not a woman. How can you see anything! Do you think that every man would have put out his hand to another who loved his wife and said so? It was splendid—I was so proud of you.'

'What else could I have done? And then, I was not jealous, I am not now, I never shall be, of him.'

'You are right in that, dear. That is not the sort of love that a man need be jealous of. It is not love at all, as we think of love, strong as it is.'

'How much you know!'

'I know about love—yes, a great deal, for I have thought about it, ever since I first loved you, when I was little. Yes, I know much about love, much more than you would think. What Rex feels, is a sort of wild adoration, half ecstasy, half imagination, which he connects in some way with my face and the sound of my voice. That is all. It is not like what I feel for you, or you for me. He would not be sorry if I died. It would make it easier for him. He would build temples to me, and kneel before a

picture of me, and be quite as happy as he is now. One sees that. And yet it is all so real, and he suffers so fearfully, that his hair has turned white. Poor fellow, and I am so very fond of him!'

'What makes you think all you say, Hilda?' asked Greif, growing interested in her strange view of the case.

'The whole thing. He is as fond of you as ever, and more so, just as you are of him. Now if it were our sort of love, you two would instinctively go and cut each other's throats, and that would be the natural ending. Instead of that, you love each other like brothers as you are. Do you not see that it must be a different kind of love from ours?'

'Yes. You are right. But it is not less real.'

'Less real? No! It seems more real to him than ours could ever seem, if he were capable of it. That is the reason why he is so grand, and true and noble—being placed as he is. If he loved me as you have always loved me, I should hate him, even if I pitied

him; I should want him to go away, so that I might never see him again, nor hear of him. I should be miserable so long as he were under the roof. And instead of that—I feel that he is a dear brother and a true friend.'

'So do I.'

'And he will be all we expect of him. You and I must try to make his life happy, Greif. He is a very lonely man. He is much older than we are—just think! He is nearly as old as my mother. But he looked old to-day. Poor Rex! I would do anything to make him happy.'

'You have made him happy already.'

'How?'

'You have made him forgive himself, and you have made him feel that he is one of us, more than ever before. Only a woman could have done that, Hilda—perhaps no woman but you.'

'Do you think I did that? I should be very glad——'

'I am sure of it. He never yields unless

he is convinced. He is a man of iron and steel. If he had still believed that he was to blame for all this, no earthly power would have made him consent to live. And now, he will live, and he will be happy. He owes his life to you, darling.'

'As I owe yours to him.'

'As I owe mine to you both. Surely, no three were ever so bound together as we are. It is strange and wonderful.'

'But the bond is closest here, my beloved!' exclaimed Hilda, as her arms went round him.

'Ay, closest and best!' answered Greif, as their lips met.

During that long and eventful morning Frau von Sigmundskron had been alone. Of all the four she only knew no sadness. When she went from time to time and gazed upon her little grandson, she felt as though her heart would burst with gladness. There, in his small cradle, lay the realisation of a hope she had thought vain for nearly twenty years. There lay a little Sigmundskron, a sturdy little baby with white hair

and bright eyes and rosy mouth, his tiny hands clenched stubbornly in the first effort to feel his own mimic strength, fair as a Gothic child should be, without blemish, perfect and noble in every point. There he was, and his name was Sigmundskron as well as Sigmund, and the day would come when he should be tall and strong. In his veins there stirred that good blood that had never known fear or dishonour, untainted still through nigh a thousand years. Not only had he the name, as Greif had—that little child had the blood also, and he would surely have the loyal heart and the strong hand. And he should have brothers, too. Never again should the fate of the ancient race hang by the single silken strand that had borne its burden so bravely. And that little child was to have not only the name and the lion's soul, and the bare walls of Sigmundskron. He was to have broad lands and princely wealth. He was to have the power, as well as the will, the worldly greatness befitting the son of such a high and lordly line.

It seemed too good to believe, too good to think, too good to see. Day after day from his birth the white-haired lady came and looked at him and never tired of the wonderful truth. All had been wonderful of late, but the rosy little Sigmund was the best of all her wonders. She had grown to care for little else. She loved them all with a great love passing words, but she loved them best for what they had given her, for what lay in the cradle in the great cool nursery.

The tears would come, and she let them flow on unheeded, day by day. But they were not the old tears of long ago, that had left cruel stains upon her cheeks and aching fires in her brain. Their soothing streams came from the fountain of a new life and washed away the pain of the grey years in their healing flood. Instead of the pale dye of grief, they left behind them soft, faint hues as of returning day; instead of fierce, smarting heat, they brought the clear light of other years to the eyes that had seen such horror of death, such misery of want,

and that now gazed tranquilly on such sights of unspeakable joy.

To-day, she spent long hours alone beside what she loved best in the world. The christening had given a new impulse to all she felt, and it seemed to her that the child was more her own than ever. A long time she stood with folded hands before the tiny bed, thinking, thinking always of the great deeds that little boy should one day dare and do, for God and king and country. Many times she stooped and kissed his dazzling face, that seemed to glow with light from within, and each time her cheeks were wet, as the sudden and almost unbearable thrill of certain happiness leaped through her heart. Then all at once she smiled, then turned and went out softly and entered her own room.

The glory of the summer's day streamed in through the lofty window, shedding a blaze of light upon all within, upon the smooth matting that had replaced the patched old carpet, upon the old chest that held so many of her dearest treasures, upon

the broad expanse of black velvet whereon were hung the most precious things she owned, two swords in their scabbards and a leathern helmet with a gilded spike.

She went up to the place and stood a moment, looking at the three objects. Then she took down the sabre and held it in her two hands, lovingly, as she would have held the child she adored. Her white hand grasped the hilt, and the burnished blade leaped from its sheath like a meteor into the blazing sunshine.

There was not a tarnished spot upon the good steel, not a speck of dust upon its gleaming length, not a shadow along the bright bevel. But she was not satisfied. With endless care she polished the shining surface again and again, with leather and silk, as she had done every day since she had brought it back nearly twenty years ago. She sheathed it then in its scabbard, and rubbed that, and last of all the hilt. Then she was satisfied.

Once more she paused and gazed at the spot where it had hung so long, as though

asking herself whether she could part with it. But her hesitation was short, and the bright smile came again to her face as she went back to her grandson's cradle. With her own hands she drove two nails into the tapestried wall above his head. As the clock struck twelve, she fastened the burnished weapon securely in its new place.

'It is the sword of his fathers,' she said softly. 'God give him strength and grace to draw it in good cause!'

THE END

Printed by R. & R. Clark, *Edinburgh.*

PS
1455
G7
1889
v.3

Crawford, Francis Marion
Greifenstein

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY

UTL AT DOWNSVIEW
D RANGE BAY SHLF POS ITEM C
39 13 13 01 16 015 4